

Galaxy

MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1958

35¢

**ROBERT
SHECKLEY'S
GREATEST
AND MOST
SUSPENSE-
FILLED
STORY
TIME
KILLER**

•
**X-RAYS
IN
SPACE**
By
**WILLY
LEY**

•
**AND
OTHER
STORIES**



Looking For Us, Professor?

"Hmm, yes. I was just cogitating upon the causes of GALAXY Science Fiction's phenomenal growth in popularity."

"And that needs an explanation, Professor?"

"From a socio-psychological viewpoint, most definitely. To what do you attribute the constant increase of interest?"

"Well . . . let's try it this way, Professor. Suppose we ask the questions and you answer them."

"So? A bit unusual, but go right ahead."

"Do you think atomic doom is the only future for mankind?"

"Not exactly, but the newspapers and the commentators—"

"Of course. Well, we SHOW other possible futures. Do you believe we will be able to leave the Earth?"

"Eventually, perhaps. But not in our lifetime."

"We don't agree. Assuming you're right, though, isn't that all the more reason to want to know what we'll find on other planets, Professor?"

"I think I see what you mean."

"Can we achieve immortality?"

"Ah. Hum. I've often wondered."

"And travel to different eras in time?"

"That would be exciting."

"And you've been trying to discover why GALAXY is growing so popular? Every idea we've mentioned—and a lot more, besides—is treated dramatically and vividly in GALAXY! You really live them!"

"Umm. How do I subscribe? After all, one shouldn't resist a trend, should one? Heh, heh!"

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Galaxy

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Cover by DEMBER showing first landing on Titan, the sixth moon of Saturn. The largest satellite in the Solar System, Titan is the only one definitely known to retain an atmosphere, making mining of its rich ores easy and profitable. In accordance with U.N. policy, Titan, like Earth's own Antarctica, has been divided into national zones in advance of landing, and this section is being officially claimed for the U.S.A.

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PICK ONE

IT was the *New York Times Magazine* that reported: "In case of obligatory metamorphosis into an animal, 90 per cent of adult male Britons would prefer to become horses and 97 per cent of female Britons would prefer to become cats. — *Oxford University*."

No U.S. university being willing to poll American preferences, GALAXY undertook this vital task. Our Interviewer 1001 (we number them like checks in a new checkbook) was assigned to get the Inner Meaning from any passing psychiatrist (the object was no money).

His notes follow:

"Cornered Dr. Ashley Pantagruel at a party. Read clipping. Dr. Pantagruel cornered me. 'The sexual symbolism of horse and cat is too well known to bear repeating,' he said, and has been proving it for hours. Scotch and bourbon ran out; hate gin, but not that much. Something re toilet training: horses anywhere, cats in catbox. Wish I could ask that chartreuse girl in the very brainy-looking sweater, have to knock him down to get by . . ."

The fine for disturbing the peace equaling an office visit, we dispatched Interviewer 1002 to query Dr. Liebfraumilch. His 50 minutes expired before he could get past 1001's findings. However,

both expert opinions coincide: the preferences of the adult male and female Britons were no surprise at all to psychiatry.

Considerably in conflict with this definitive analysis are the answers of the American public. Since the *Times* neglected to state how large and representative the Oxford sampling was, we settled upon 5493 interviews as optimum. To hold down expenses, all were interviewed within subway distance. As with Drs. Pantagruel and Liebfraumilch, we revealed the Oxford statistics to a control group to see whether their preferences would be affected.

TABLE I — MALES

Cats 97%

TABLE II — FEMALES

Horses 90%

This, of course, is in direct contrast with the Oxford findings. Questioned about this (by telephone), Drs. Pantagruel and Liebfraumilch stated that it was equally predictable in terms of parental fixations. We then queried the control group, which disagreed in varying degrees of emotionalism and literacy approximately as follows: "Who wants to be a horse (cat) when all the dames (guys) are cats (horses)?" Dr. Pantagruel: "That's what *they* think." Dr. Liebfraumilch: "That's what *they* think."

We showed the control group

its first ballot (we kept nothing from them) and obtained a different response:

TABLE III — MALES (REV.)

Horses 97%

TABLE IV — FEMALES (REV.)

Cats 90%

Dr. Pantagrue! : "What better proof do you need? As I was saying when we were cut off last time, insecurity and guilt as to sex—"

Dr. Liebfraumilch: "Of course. Sexual guilt and insecurity—"

We would have gone back to the control group, but our accountant (cat-horse) objected on the grounds that he could not keep on interminably working out table revisions, a view shared by our office manager (horse-cat) who was furnishing subway tokens and coins for telephones. We had to be satisfied with the statistical prediction that, as the horse goes, so goes the cat, or vice versa, whether for their reasons or the doctors' being left for future researchers to determine.

This decision freed Interviewers 1001 and 1002 to aid 1003, who had been having rather a rough time all by herself with the uncontrolled group, and we obtained these conclusions in pretty short order:

TABLE V — MALES (RAW)

Horses (draft) 0%

Horses (race) 1%

Bulls 1%

Eagles 97%

Undecided 1%

TABLE VI — FEMALES (RAW)

Cats (alley) 0%

Cats (pedigree) 9%

Mink 9%

Swans 90%

Undecided 1%

In females (raw), the seeming error of 9% is caused by all insisting on being both cats and fur-bearing animals; the latter is listed as a single item, since the furs are about equal, statistically speaking, in retail value.

Another false deduction (bird-breeding) may be made from the fact that male preference was 97% eagles and female 90% swans. Actually, it is as insoluble as the English dilemma — eagles and swans have as little in common romantically as horses and cats.

The "Undecided" sub-groups showed some anomalous reactions that are worthy of note:

Daisy Rose Dahlia, housewife: "Can't one be a flower?"

B.B.D. Osborne, tycoon: "You pick it — anything at all — I'm late for an appointment."

Hathaway Peterson, biology instructor: "Procreation aside, it's scientifically untenable. How would it be done?"

John Dole, retired: "Congress'll never pass it!"

Alonzo Lophouser, swami: "Go through all those incarnations again?"

— H. L. GOLD

Time Killer

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Beginning A 4-Part Serial

*It stands to reason that the last thing a man
can bungle is his own death . . . but not Blaine;
he had some finished business yet to unfinish!*

Illustrated by WOOD





AFTERWARD, Thomas Blaine thought about the manner of his dying and wished it had been more interesting.

Why couldn't his death have come while he was battling a typhoon, meeting a tiger's charge, or climbing a windswept mountain? Why had his death been so tame, so commonplace, so ordinary?

But an enterprising death, he realized, would have been out of character for him. Undoubtedly he was meant to die in just the quick, common, messy, painless way he did. And all his life must have gone into the forming and shaping of that death — a vague indication in childhood, a fair promise in his college years, an implacable certainty at the age of thirty-two.

Still, no matter how commonplace, one's death is the most climactic event of one's life. Blaine thought about his with intense curiosity. He had to know about those last precious moments when his own particular death lay waiting for him on a dark New Jersey highway.

Had there been some warning sign, some portent? What had he done, or not done? What had he been thinking?

Those final seconds were crucial to him.

How, exactly, had he died?

HE had been driving over a straight, empty white highway, his headlights probing ahead, the darkness receding endlessly before him. His speedometer read seventy-five. It felt like forty. Far down the road, he saw headlights approaching, the first in hours.

Blaine was returning to New York after a week's vacation at his cabin on Chesapeake Bay. He had fished and swum and dozed in the sun on the rough planks of his dock. One day he sailed his sloop to Oxford and attended a dance at the yacht club that night. He met a silly, pert-nosed girl in a blue dress who told him he looked like a South Seas adventurer, so tanned and tall in his khakis. He sailed back to his cabin the next day, to doze in the sun and dream of giving up everything, loading his sailboat with canned goods and heading for Tahiti. *Ah, Raiatea, the mountains of Moorea, the fresh trade wind . . .*

But a continent and an ocean lay between him and Tahiti, and other obstacles besides. The thought was only for an hour's dreaming and definitely not to be acted upon. Now he was returning to New York, to his job as a junior yacht designer for the famous old firm of Mattison & Peters.

The other car's headlights were drawing near. Blaine slowed to sixty.

In spite of his title, there were few yachts for Blaine to design. Old Tom Mattison took care of the conventional cruising boats. His brother Rolf, known as the Wizard of Mystic, had an international reputation for his ocean-racing sailboats and fast one-designs. So what was there for a junior yacht designer to do?

Blaine drew layouts and deck plans, and handled promotion, advertising and publicity. It was responsible work and not without its satisfactions. But it was not yacht designing.

He knew he should strike out on his own. But there were so many yacht designers, so few customers. As he had told Laura, it was rather like designing arbalests, catapults and matchlocks. Interesting creative work, but who would buy your products?

"You could find a market for your sailboats," she had told him, distressingly direct.

He had grinned. "Action isn't my forte. I'm an expert on contemplation and mild regret."

"You mean you're lazy."

"Not at all. That's like saying that a hawk doesn't gallop well, or a horse has poor soaring ability. You can't compare different species. I'm just not the go-getter type of human. For me, dreams, reveries, visions, and plans meant only for contemplation, never for execution."

"I hate to hear you talk like that," she said snappishly.

BLAINE *had* been laying it on a bit thick, of course. But there was a lot of truth in it. He had a pleasant job, an adequate salary, a secure position. He had an apartment in Greenwich Village, a hi-fi, a car, a small cabin on Chesapeake Bay, a fine sloop, and the affection of Laura and several other girls. Perhaps, as Laura somewhat tritely expressed it, he was caught in an eddy on the current of life . . . But so what? You could observe the scenery better from a gently revolving eddy.

The other car's headlights were very near. Blaine noticed, with a sense of shock, that he had increased speed to eighty miles an hour.

He let up on the accelerator. His car swerved freakishly, violently, toward the oncoming headlights.

Blowout? Steering failure? He twisted hard on the steering wheel. It wouldn't turn. His car struck the low concrete separation between north and south lanes, and bounded high into the air. The steering wheel spun in his hands and the engine wailed like a lost soul.

The other car was trying to swerve, too late. They were going to meet nearly head-on.

And Blaine thought, Yes, I'm

one of them. I'm one of those silly asses you read about whose cars go out of control and kill innocent people. Modern cars and modern roads and higher speeds and the same old sloppy reflexes. . .

Suddenly, unaccountably, the steering wheel was working again, a razor's edge reprieve. Blaine ignored it. As the other car's headlights glared across his windshield, his mood suddenly changed from regret to exultance. For a moment, he welcomed the smash, lusted for it, and for pain, destruction, cruelty and death.

Then the cars came together. The feeling of exultance faded as quickly as it had come. Blaine felt a profound regret for all he had left undone, the waters unsailed, movies unseen, books unread, girls untouched. He was thrown forward. The steering wheel broke off in his hands. The steering column speared him through the chest and broke his spine as his head drove through the thick safety glass.

An instant later, he was quickly, commonly, messily, painlessly dead.

II

HE awoke in a white bed in a white room.

"He's alive now," someone said.

Blaine opened his eyes. Two men were standing over him. One

was an ugly, red-faced man dressed in white, who appeared to be a doctor. The other was a tiny, bald, spiderlike old man with a peering, animated monkeylike face.

"How do you feel?" the doctor asked.

"All right, I guess," Blaine said.

"Do you see?" the doctor said, turning to the spiderlike old man. "He's perfectly sane, Mr. Reilly."

"Hmm," said Reilly.

"Yes, sir," the doctor said. "The death trauma has been overrated. Grossly overrated, as my forthcoming book will prove."

Reilly nodded impatiently. "Well, let's get started with the recording."

He and the doctor walked away. Blaine watched them go, wondering what they had been talking about. A fat and motherly nurse came to his bedside. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Fine," said Blaine. "But I'd like to know—"

"Sorry," the nurse said, "no questions yet; doctor's orders. Drink this, it'll pep you up. That's a good boy. Don't worry, everything's going to be all right."

She left. Her reassuring words frightened him. What did she mean, *everything's going to be all right*? That meant something was wrong! What was it, what was wrong? What was he doing here, what had happened?

The doctor and Mr. Reilly re-

turned, accompanied by a young woman.

"Is he all right, Doctor?" the young woman asked.

"Perfectly sane," the red-faced doctor said. "I'd call it a good fit."

"Then I can begin the recording?"

"Certainly, Miss Thorne, though I cannot guarantee his behavior. The death trauma, though grossly overrated, is still capable of—"

"All right, Marie—begin," Reilly said, in a voice that showed who was boss.

"Yes, sir," the girl said.

SHE walked across to Blaine and bent over him. She was a very pretty girl, Blaine noticed. Her features were clean-cut, her skin fresh and glowing. She had long, gleaming brown hair pulled too tightly back over her small ears, and there was a faint hint of perfume about her. She should have been beautiful, but she was marred by the immobility of her features, the controlled tenseness of her slender body. It was hard to imagine her laughing or crying. It was impossible to imagine her in bed. There was something of the fanatic about her, something of the dedicated revolutionary; but he suspected that her cause was herself.

"Where do you think you are?" she asked.

"Looks like a hospital. I sup-

pose—" He stopped. He had just noticed a small microphone in her hand.

"Yes, what do you suppose?"

She made a small gesture. Men came forward and wheeled heavy equipment around his bed.

"Go right ahead," Marie Thorne said. "Tell us."

"To hell with that," Blaine said moodily, watching the men set up their machines around him. "What is this? What's going on?"

"We're trying to help you," said Marie Thorne. "Won't you cooperate?"

Blaine nodded, wishing she would smile. He felt suddenly very unsure of himself. Had something happened to him?

"Do you remember the accident?" she asked.

"What accident?"

"Do you remember being hurt?"

Blaine shuddered as his memory returned in a rush of spinning lights, wailing engine, impact and breakage.

"Yes. The steering wheel broke. I got it through the chest. Then my head hit."

"Look at your chest," she said.

Blaine looked. His chest, beneath white pajamas, was unmarked.

"Impossible!" he cried. His own voice sounded hollow, distant, unreal. He was aware of the men around his bed talking as they bent over their machines, but they

seemed like shadows, flat and without substance. Their thin, unimportant voices were like flies buzzing against a window. The red-faced doctor smiled dully, and spiderlike old Reilly tapped his foot and looked impatient.

"Nice first reaction."

"Very nice indeed."

Marie Thorne said to him, "You are unhurt."

BLAINE looked at his undamaged body and remembered the accident. "I can't believe it!"

"He's coming on perfectly."

"Fine mixture of belief and incredulity."

Marie Thorne said, "Quiet, please. Go ahead."

"I remember the accident," Blaine said. "I remember the smashing. I remember—dying."

"Get that?"

"Hell, yes. It really plays!"

"Perfectly spontaneous scene."

"Marvelous! They'll go wild over it!"

She said, "A little less noise, please. Then you remember dying?"

"Yes, yes, I died!"

"His face!"

"That ludicrous expression heightens the reality."

She said, "Look carefully at your body. Here's a mirror. Examine your face."

Blaine looked, and shivered like a man in fever. He touched the

mirror, then ran shaking fingers over his face.

"It isn't my face! Where's my face? Where did you put my body and face?"

He was in a nightmare from which he could never awaken. Reilly and the ugly doctor watched him. The flat shadow men surrounded him, their voices buzzing like flies against a window, tending their cardboard machines, filled with vague menace, yet strangely indifferent, almost unaware of him. Marie Thorne bent low over him with her tight, pretty face, and from her small red mouth came gentle nightmare words.

"Your body is dead, killed in an automobile accident. You can remember its dying. But we managed to save the part of you that really counts. We saved your mind and have given you a new body for it here, in what you would call the future."

Blaine opened his mouth to scream, and closed it again. "It's unbelievable," he said instead.

And the flies buzzed.

"Understatement."

"Well, of course. One can't be frenetic forever."

"I expected a little more scenery-chewing."

"Wrongly. Understatement rather accentuates his dilemma."

"Perhaps, in pure stage terms. But consider the thing realistically. This poor guy has just dis-

covered that he died in an automobile accident and is now reborn in a new body. So what does he say about it? He says, 'It's unbelievable.' Damn it, he's not really reacting to the shock!"

"He is! You're projecting!"

Blaine, deep in his nightmare, was hardly aware of the soft, buzzing voices. He asked, "Did I really die?"

She nodded.

"And am I really born again in a different body?"

She nodded again, waiting.

Blaine looked at her, and at the shadow men tending their cardboard machines. Why were they bothering him? Why couldn't they go pick on some other dead man? Corpses shouldn't be forced to answer questions. Death was Man's ancient privilege, his immemorial pact with life, granted to the slave as well as the noble. Death was Man's solace and his right. But perhaps they had revoked that right and now you couldn't evade your responsibilities simply by being dead.

THEY were waiting for him to speak. And Blaine wondered if insanity still retained its hereditary privileges. With ease, he could slip over and find out.

But insanity is not granted to everyone. Blaine's self-control returned. He looked up at Marie Thorne.

"My feelings," he said slowly, "are difficult to describe. I've died, and now I'm contemplating the fact. I don't suppose any man fully believes—"

"Let's cut it right here. He's getting analytical."

"I think you're right," Marie Thorne said. She bent low over Blaine. "Tell me your name."

"Thomas Blaine."

"What?"

All noise in the room stopped. The men tending the recording machines were deathly silent. Mr. Reilly stepped forward, and the doctor watched him anxiously.

"What did you say your name was?" Reilly asked.

"Blaine. Thomas Blaine."

"Age?"

"Thirty-two."

"Marital status?"

"Single."

"Are you sure?" Reilly insisted.

"Are you sure that your name is Blaine?"

"Absolutely certain," Blaine answered. "What is—"

Reilly's mouth twisted. He controlled himself with an effort and asked, "What do you remember about the Threshold?"

"The what?"

"The Threshold!" Reilly roared. "Tell me about it!"

"I don't remember anything," Blaine said.

"You must! You were in the Threshold for 158 years, until we

pulled you into this body! You *must* remember! Tell me what it was like!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Blaine said firmly.

The spidery old man stared at him. He asked again, "*What is your name?*"

"Blaine."

"He's the wrong man!" Reilly screamed. "Don't you fools see it? Wrong, all wrong, everything wrong!"

The doctor moved to Reilly's side, trying to calm him. But the old man thrust him aside and glared down at Blaine.

"You're the wrong man!" Reilly shouted. "And you don't remember the Threshold! Why, damn you, you've no right in that body, no right at all! It wasn't *meant* for you, you useless interloper! The whole experiment's a failure and you've stolen a good, expensive body. Thief! I'll rip the life out of you with my two hands!"

REILLY was hysterical with anger. His thin, long-nailed hands reached for Blaine's throat. Marie Thorne and the doctor pulled him back. In a moment, Reilly recovered and began to tremble violently.

"Sir," the doctor said to him, "your body is not functioning properly. At best, it is not allowing you to think well. At worst, it can't withstand shocks like these. Under

the circumstances, I must insist that you take an immediate reincarnation."

"No . . ." Reilly said feebly.

"Yes," the doctor said. "You *must* reincarnate, sir, while you're still able. But first, some rest."

He led the old man away. The technicians, solid and mundane now, their vague menace disappeared, began rolling away their equipment.

"Darn good while it lasted."

"A collector's item."

"Shame it'll never be released."

"Wait!" Blaine cried. "I don't understand. Where am I? What happened? How—"

"I'll explain everything later," Marie Thorne said. "I'm terribly sorry, things have gone wrong. I have to help arrange Mr. Reilly's reincarnation."

The men and equipment were gone. Marie Thorne smiled reassuringly and hurried away.

Blaine felt ridiculously close to tears. He blinked rapidly when the fat and motherly nurse came back.

"Drink this," said the nurse. "It'll make you sleep. That's it, take it all down like a good boy. Just relax, you had a big day, what with dying and being reborn and all."

Two big tears rolled down Blaine's cheeks.

"Dear me," said the nurse, "the cameras should be here now. Those are genuine spontaneous tears if I ever saw any. Many a

tragic and spontaneous scene I've witnessed in this infirmary, believe me, and I could tell those snooty recording boys something about genuine emotion if I wanted to, and they thinking they know all the secrets of the human heart."

"Where am I?" Blaine asked drowsily. "Where is this?"

"This is the Rex Corporation," the nurse said. "We're in the life-after-death business."

"Oh," said Blaine.

Then he was asleep.

III

AFTER many hours, he awoke calm and rested. He looked at the white bed and white room, and remembered.

He had been killed in an accident and reborn in the future. There had been a doctor who considered the death trauma overrated, and men who recorded his spontaneous reaction and declared them a collector's item, and a pretty girl whose features showed a lamentable lack of emotion, and a nurse who spoke of the life-after-death business.

Blaine yawned and stretched. Dead. Dead at thirty-two. A pity, he thought, that this young life was snuffed in its prime. He'd been a good sort, really, and quite promising . . .

But that was no way to feel. Yesterday, he reminded himself

firmly, he was a yacht designer driving back from Maryland. To-day he was a man reborn into the future.

The future! Reborn!

The words lacked impact. He had already grown used to the idea. One grows used to anything, he thought, even to one's death. *Especially* to one's death. If you chopped off a man's head three times a day for twenty years, he'd grow used to it, and probably cry like a baby if you stopped . . .

He didn't care to pursue that train of thought any further.

He thought about Laura. Would she weep for him? Would she get drunk? Or would she just feel mildly depressed at the news, and take a tranquilizer for it? What about Jane and Miriam? Would they even hear about his death? Probably not. Months later, they might wonder why he never called any more.

ENOUGH of that. All that was past. Now he was in the *future*.

He remembered magazine articles and stories he had read. To-day there might be free atomic power, undersea farming, world peace, universal birth regulation, interplanetary travel, free love, brotherhood of mankind, a cure for all diseases, and a planned society in which men breathed deep the air of freedom.

That's what there should be,

Blaine thought. But there were less pleasant possibilities. Perhaps a grim-faced Oligarch had Earth in his iron grasp, while a dedicated underground struggled toward freedom. Or small, gelatinous alien creatures with outlandish names might have enslaved the human race. Perhaps a new and horrible disease marched unchecked across the land, or possibly the Earth, swept of all culture by hydrogen warfare, fought painfully back to technological civilization while human wolfpacks roamed the badlands; or a million other equally dismal things could have happened.

And yet, Blaine thought, mankind showed a historic ability to avoid the extremes of doom as well as the extremes of bliss. Chaos was forever predicted and utopia was continually seen just ahead. And neither came to pass.

Accordingly, Blaine expected that this future would show certain definite improvements over the past, but he expected some deteriorations as well; some old problems would be gone, but certain others would have taken their places.

"In short," Blaine said to himself, "I expect that this future will be like all futures in comparison with their pasts. That's not very specific, but then I'm not in the predicting or the prophesying business."

HIS thoughts were interrupted by Marie Thorne walking briskly into the room.

"Good morning," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Like a new man."

"Good. Would you sign this, please?" She held out a pen and a typed paper.

"You're very damned efficient," said Blaine. "What am I signing?"

"Read it," she said. "It's a release absolving us from any legal responsibility in saving your life."

"Eh?"

"We saved you. But it's against the law to save lives without the potential victim's written consent. There wasn't opportunity for the Rex Corporation lawyers to obtain your consent beforehand. So we'd like to protect ourselves now."

"What is the Rex Corporation?"

"We're affiliated with the Hereafter Corporation," she said. "Our outfit is as well known today as Flyier-Thiess was in your time."

"Who's Flyier-Thiess?"

"No? Ford, then?"

"Yeah, Ford. So the Rex Corporation is as well known as Ford. What does it do?"

"It manufactures Rex Power Systems," she said, "which are used to power spaceships, reincarnation machines, hereafter drivers, and the like. It was a development of the Rex Power Systems that snatched you from your car at the moment after death and

brought you into the future. The trouble is, you aren't the man we were *trying* to save."

"Who were you trying to save?"

"A religious leader of your time. We wanted him to endorse our product."

Blaine looked puzzled.

MARIE Thorne went on. "We're in the scientific after-life business," she told him. "We can guarantee a life after death. But the organized religions don't like our form of salvation. They boycott us. Their adherents form a large potential market for our product. If we could get the endorsement of a progressive religious leader, it would help break down the sales resistance."

"What happened to the man you tried to save?" Blaine asked.

"That's what we'd like to know," Marie said. "You appeared in his place. It was very startling."

"I can imagine," said Blaine. "But what is this scientific hereafter? How does it work?"

"Would you mind signing the release?"

The paper stated that he, Thomas Blaine, agreed not to bring suit against the Rex Corporation for their unauthorized saving of his life in the year 1958 and the subsequent transporting of that life to a host body in New York in the year 2110.

Blaine signed. "Now," he said,

"about this scientific hereafter—"

"There isn't time," Marie told him. "It works. Just take my word for it. You'll see a part of the process almost immediately."

"I will?"

"Yes. Mr. Reilly is going to undertake an immediate reincarnation. He's been putting it off, trying to find a really suitable body. But his own body is deteriorating fast. His doctor advises reincarnation at once, and his grandfather is insisting on it."

"Reilly's grandfather? How old is *he*?"

"He was eighty-one when he died."

"*What?*"

"Yes, he died about sixty years ago. Reilly's father is dead, too, but he didn't stay in the Threshold, which is a pity because he had excellent business sense. An extra advisory ghost is always useful. Why are you staring at me, Blaine? Oh, I forgot, you don't know the setup. It's very simple, really. You'll pick it up as you go along."

"I hope so," Blaine said.

"Of course you will. The nurse will bring you some clothes. Please dress at once. Mr. Reilly wants to make you a business offer before he undertakes his reincarnation."

"What kind of an offer?"

"I'd better let him tell you himself," Marie Thorne said, and briskly left the room.

IV

THE nurse brought him lunch on a tray. The bearded doctor came in, examined him and declared him perfectly fit. There was not the slightest trace of rebirth depression, he declared, and the death trauma was obviously overrated. No reason why Blaine shouldn't be up and about.

The nurse came back with clothing, a blue shirt, brown slacks, and soft, bulbous gray shoes. The outfit, she assured him, was quite conservative.

Blaine ate with good appetite. But before dressing, he examined his new body in the full-length bathroom mirror. It was the first chance he'd had for a careful appraisal.

His former body had been tall and lean, with straight black hair and a good-humored boyish face. In thirty-two years, he had grown used to that quick, deft, easy-moving body. With good grace, he had accepted its constitutional flaws, its occasional illnesses, and had glorified them into virtues, into unique properties of the personality that resided within them. For his body's limitations, far more than its capabilities, seemed to express his own particular essence.

He had been fond of that body.

His new body was a shock.

It was heavily muscled, barrel-chested, broad-shouldered. It felt

top-heavy, for the legs were a little short in proportion to the herculean torso. His hands were large and calloused. Blaine made a fist and gazed at it respectfully. He could probably fell an ox with a single blow, if an ox were procurable.

His face was square and bold, with a prominent jaw, wide cheekbones and a Roman nose. His hair was blond and curly. His eyes were a steely blue. It was a somewhat handsome, slightly brutal face.

"I don't like it," Blaine said emphatically. "And I hate curly blond hair."

His new body had considerable physical strength, but he had always disliked sheer physical strength. The body looked clumsy, graceless, difficult to manage. It was the kind of body that bumped into chairs and stepped on people's toes, shook hands too vigorously, talked too loudly and sweated profusely. Clothes would always bulge and constrict this body. It would need continual hard exercise to keep in shape, and Blaine detested exercise. Perhaps he would even have to diet; the body looked as though it had a slight tendency toward fat.

"**P**HYSICAL strength is all very well," Blaine told himself, "if one has a purpose for it. Otherwise it's just a nuisance

and a distraction, like trawling equipment on a racing yacht."

The body was bad enough, but the face was worse. Blaine had never liked strong, harsh, rough-hewn faces. They were fine for sandhogs, army sergeants, jungle explorers and the like, but not for a man who enjoyed cultured society. Such a face was obviously incapable of subtlety of expression. All nuance, the delicate interplay of line and plane, would be lost. With this face, you could grin or frown; only gross emotions would show.

Experimentally, he smiled boyishly at the mirror. The result was a satyr's leer.

"I've been gypped," Blaine said bitterly.

It was apparent to him that the qualities of his present mind and his new body were opposed. Cooperation between them seemed impossible. Of course, his personality might reshape his body; on the other hand, his body might have some demands to make on his personality.

"We'll see," Blaine told his formidable body, "who's boss."

On his left shoulder was a long, jagged scar. He wondered how the body had received so grievous a wound. Then he began wondering where the body's real owner was. Could he still be lodged in the brain, lying doggo, waiting a chance to take over?

Speculation was useless. Later, perhaps, Blaine would find out. He took a final look at himself in the mirror.

He didn't like what he saw. He was afraid he never would.

"Well," Blaine said at last, "dead men can't be choosers."

He turned from the mirror and began dressing. Later, Marie Thorne came and took him to Mr. Reilly's tower apartment.

MR. Reilly sat erect and almost lost in a great, soft, thronelike chair. His wrinkled translucent skin was stretched tight across his skull and clawed hands, and bone and tendon showed clearly through the leathery, shrunken flesh. Blaine had the impression of blood coursing sluggishly through the brittle, purple varicosed veins, threatening momentarily to stop. Yet Reilly's posture was firm and his eyes were lucid in his humorous monkey face.

"Please be seated, sir," Mr. Reilly said. "You too, Miss Thorne. I was just discussing you with my grandfather, Mr. Blaine."

Blaine glanced around, almost expecting to see the sixty-years-dead grandfather looming spectrally over him. But there was no sign of him in the ornate, high-ceilinged room.

"He's gone now," Mr. Reilly explained. "Poor Grandfather can

maintain an ectoplasmic state for only a brief time. But even so, he's better off than most ghosts. He tells me I must begin my reincarnation immediately."

"And are you?" Blaine asked.

"Of course. Ghosts generally have the power of viewing the future, you know. I could hardly go against his advice."

Blaine's expression must have changed, for Reilly asked, "Don't you believe in ghosts, Mr. Blaine?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Of course not. I suppose the word has unfortunate connotations for your twentieth-century mind. Clanking chains, skeletons, all that nonsense. But words change their meaning, and even reality is altered as mankind alters and manipulates nature."

"I see," Blaine said politely.

"You consider that doubletalk," Mr. Reilly said good-naturedly. "It wasn't meant to be. Consider the manner in which words change their meaning. In the twentieth century, 'atoms' became a catch-all word for imaginative writers with their 'atom guns' and 'atom-powered ships.' An absurd word, which any level-headed man would do well to ignore, just as you level-headedly ignore 'ghosts.' Yet a few years later, 'atoms' conjured a picture of very real and imminent doom. No level-headed man could continue to ignore the word!"

REILLY smiled reminiscently. "‘Radiation’ changed from a dull textbook term to a source of cancerous ulcers. ‘Space-sickness’ was an abstract and unloaded term in your time. But in fifty years it meant hospitals filled with twisted bodies. Words tend to change, Mr. Blaine, from an abstract, fanciful, or academic use to a functional, realistic, everyday use. It happens when manipulation catches up with theory."

"And ghosts?"

"The process has been similar. Mr. Blaine, you'll simply have to change your concept of the word."

"It'll be difficult," Blaine said.

"But necessary. Remember, there was always a lot of evidence in their favor. The prognosis for their existence, you might say, was favorable. And when life after death became fact instead of wishful thinking, ghosts became fact."

"I think I'll have to see one first," Blaine said.

"Undoubtedly you will. But let's get down to business. Frankly, Mr. Blaine, your presence here is something of an embarrassment to us."

"I regret that."

"It wasn't your fault, of course. But look at the position we're in. We set up an expensive experiment and buy a costly host body. We expect to snatch a progressive cleric from your time to use in our campaign to sell the organized religions."

"I guess I won't be much help there," Blaine said.

"No. And what's worse, you bring us no information about the Threshold."

"What's the Threshold?"

"It is the interface region between Earth and the hereafter, through which you passed on your way here. We expected valuable data about the Threshold. But you have no recollection of it. None at all! The religions could use that fact against us, Blaine, if it ever leaked out."

"Look," Blaine said, "I'm grateful to you people for saving my life, even if you did it accidentally. You certainly don't think I'm going to spill your secrets, do you?"

"Mistakes can happen," Reilly pointed out. "Accidents can occur. You might change your mind. No, Mr. Blaine, you should not be here in 2110, a walking proof of bad judgment. Therefore, sir, I'd like to make a proposition."

"I'm listening," Blaine said.

"Suppose Rex buys you hereafter insurance, thus ensuring your life after death — would you consent to suicide?"

Blaine blinked rapidly, stunned. "No. Certainly not."

"Why not?" Reilly asked.

FOR a moment, the reason seemed self-evident. What creature consents to take its own

life? Unhappily, Man does. So Blaine had to stop and sort his thoughts.

"First of all," he said, "I'm not fully convinced about this hereafter."

"Suppose we convince you," Mr. Reilly said. "Would you commit suicide then?"

"No!"

"But how shortsighted! Mr. Blaine, consider your position. This age is alien to you, inimical, unsatisfactory. What kind of work can you do? Who can you talk with, and about what? You can't even walk the streets without being in deadly peril of your life."

"I 'LL find out how things work here," Blaine said.

"But you can never really know, never understand! You're in the same position a caveman would be, thrown haphazardly into your own 1958. He'd think himself capable enough, I suppose, on the basis of his experience with saber-tooth tigers and hairy mastodons. Perhaps some kind soul would even warn him about gangsters. But what good would it do? Would it save him from being run over by a car, electrocuted on a subway track, asphyxiated by a gas stove, falling through an elevator shaft, cut to pieces on a power saw, or breaking his neck in the bathtub."

"You have to be born to those

things in order to walk unscathed among them, Mr. Blaine. And even so, these things happened to people in your age when they relaxed their attention for a moment! How much more likely would our caveman be to stumble?"

"You're exaggerating the situation," Blaine said, feeling a light perspiration form on his forehead.

"Am I? The dangers of the forest are as nothing to the dangers of the city. And when the city becomes a super-city—"

"I won't commit suicide," Blaine declared. "I'll take my chances. Let's drop the subject."

"Why can't you be reasonable?" Mr. Reilly demanded in annoyance. "Kill yourself now and save us all a lot of trouble. I can outline your future for you if you don't. Perhaps, by sheer nerve and animal cunning, you'll survive for a year. Even two. It won't matter, in the end it's suicide anyhow. You're a suicide type. Suicide is written all over you—you were born for it, Blaine! You'll kill yourself wretchedly in a year or two, slip out of your maimed flesh with relief—but with no hereafter to welcome your tired mind."

"You're crazy!" Blaine protested.

"I'm never wrong about suicide types," Mr. Reilly said obstinately. "I can always spot them. Grandfather agrees with me, and

he's never wrong. So if you'll only—"

"No," Blaine said. "I won't kill myself. I'm afraid you'll have to hire it done."

"That's not my way," said Mr. Reilly. "I won't coerce you. But come to my reincarnation today. Get a glimpse of the hereafter. Perhaps you'll change your mind."

Blaine hesitated, and the old man grinned at him.

"No danger, I promise you, and no tricks! Did you fear I might steal your body? I selected a better host months ago from the open market. Frankly, I wouldn't *have* your body. You see, I wouldn't be comfortable in anything so gross."

The interview was over. Marie Thorne led Blaine out.

V

THE reincarnation room was arranged like a small theater. It was often used, Blaine learned, for company lectures and educational programs on an executive level. Today the audience had been kept small and select. The Rex board of directors was present, five middle-aged men sitting in the back row and talking quietly among themselves. Near them was a recording secretary. A government observer was present as required by law, and there was a gaunt man with a hat pulled low over his face. This man, Marie

explained, was a zombie representative.

Blaine and Marie sat in front, as far from the directors as possible.

On the raised stage, under white floodlights, the reincarnation apparatus was already in place. There were two sturdy armchairs equipped with straps and wires. Between the chairs was a large glossy black machine. Thick wires connected the machine to the chair, and gave Blaine the uneasy feeling that he was going to witness an execution. Several technicians were bent over the machine, making final adjustments. Standing near them was the red-faced doctor.

Mr. Reilly came on the stage, nodded to the audience and sat down in one of the chairs. He was followed by a man in his forties with a frightened, pale, determined face. This was the host, the present possessor of the body that Mr. Reilly had contracted for. The host sat down in the other chair, glanced quickly at the audience and looked down at his hands. He seemed embarrassed. Sweat beaded his upper lip, and the armpits of his jacket were stained black. He didn't look at Reilly, nor did Reilly look at him.

Another man came on the stage, bald and earnest-looking, wearing a dark suit with a cleric's collar and carrying a little black book.



He began a whispered conversation with the two seated men.

"Brother James," Marie Thorne said. "He's a clergyman of the Brotherhood of the Afterlife."

"What's that?"

"It's a new religion, outgrowth of the Crazy Years. During that time, there was a great religious controversy . . ."

The burning question of the 2040s was the spiritual status of the hereafter. It became even worse after Hereafter, Inc., announced the advent of the *scientific* hereafter. The corporation tried desperately hard to avoid any religious involvement, but involvement couldn't very well be avoided. Most churchmen felt that science was unfairly pre-empting their territory. Hereafter, Inc., whether it liked or not, was considered the spokesman for a new scientific religious position: That salvation lay, not through religious, moral or ethical considerations, but through an applied, impersonal, invariant scientific principle.

Convocations, meetings and congresses were held to decide the burning question. Some groups adopted the view that the newly revealed scientific hereafter was obviously not heaven, salvation, nirvana or paradise, because the soul was not involved. Mind, they held, is not synonymous with soul, nor is the soul contained in or a part of the mind.

Granted, science had found a means of extending the existence of one portion of the mind-body entity. That was fine, but it didn't affect the soul at all, and certainly didn't mean immortality or heaven or nirvana or anything like that. The *soul* could not be affected by scientific manipulation. And the soul's disposition after the eventual and inevitable death of the mind in its scientific hereafter would be in accordance with traditional moral, ethical and religious practices.

"**W**OW!" Blaine said. "I think I get what you mean. They were trying to achieve a coexistence between science and religion. But wasn't their reasoning a little subtle for some people?"

"Yes," Marie Thorne said, "even though they explained it much better than I've done, and backed it up with all sorts of analogies. But that was only one position. Others didn't attempt coexistence. The standard religions held firm. They simply declared that the scientific hereafter was sinful. And one group solved the problem by joining the scientific position and declaring that the soul is contained in the mind."

"I suppose that would be the Brotherhood of the Afterlife?"

"Yes. They splintered off from other religions. According to them, the mind contains the soul, and

the hereafter is the soul's rebirth after death, with no spiritual ifs and buts."

"That's keeping up with the times," Blaine said. "But morality—"

"In their view, this didn't dispense with morality. The After-lifers say that you can't impose morals and ethics on people by a system of spiritual rewards and punishments; and if you could, you shouldn't. They say that morality must be good in its own right, first in terms of the social organism, second in terms of the individual man's best good."

To Blaine, this seemed a lot to ask of morality. "I suppose it's a popular religion?" he asked.

"Very popular," Marie Thorne answered.

Blaine wanted to ask more, but Brother James had begun speaking.

"William Fitzsimmons," the clergyman said to the host, "you have come to this place of your own free will, for the purpose of discontinuing your existence upon the earthly plane and resuming it upon the spiritual plane?"

"Yes, Brother," the pale host whispered.

"And the proper scientific instrumentality has been performed so that you may continue your existence upon the spiritual plane?"

"Yes, Brother."

BROTHER James turned to Reilly. "Kenneth Reilly, you have come to this place of your own free will for the purpose of continuing your existence upon Earth in the body of William Fitzsimmons?"

"Yes, Brother," Reilly said, small and hard-faced.

"And you have made possible for William Fitzsimmons an entrance into the hereafter; and have paid a sum of money to Fitzsimmons' heirs; and have paid the government tax involved in transactions of this kind?"

"Yes, Brother," Reilly said.

"All these things being so," Brother James said, "no crime is involved, civic or religious. Here there is no taking of life, for the life and personality of William Fitzsimmons continue unabated in the hereafter, and the life and personality of Kenneth Reilly continue unabated upon Earth. Therefore, let the reincarnation proceed!"

To Blaine, it seemed a hideous mixture of wedding ceremony and execution. The smiling clergyman withdrew. Technicians secured the men to their chairs and attached electrodes to their arms, legs and foreheads. The theater grew very still and the Rex directors leaned forward expectantly in their seats.

"Go ahead," Reilly said, looking at Blaine and smiling slightly.

The chief technician turned a

dial on the black machine. It hummed loudly and the floodlights dimmed. Both men jerked convulsively against the straps, then slumped back.

Blaine whispered, "They're murdering that poor Fitzsimmons sucker."

"That poor sucker," Marie Thorne told him, "knew exactly what he was doing. He's thirty-seven years old and he's been a failure all his life. He's never been able to hold a job for long and had no previous chance for survival after death. This was a marvelous opportunity for him. Furthermore, he has a wife and five children for whom he has not been able to provide. The sum Mr. Reilly paid will enable the wife to support the children and give them a decent education."

"Hurray for them," said Blaine. "For sale, one father with slightly used body in excellent condition. Must sell! Sacrifice!"

"You're being ridiculous," she said.

"Nothing yet!" the doctor called.

Blaine could sense apprehension in the room, and a hint of fear. The seconds dragged by while the doctors and technicians clustered around the host.

"Still nothing!" the doctor called, his voice going shrill.

"What's happening?" Blaine asked Marie Thorne.

"As I told you, reincarnation is

tricky and dangerous. Reilly's mind hasn't been able to possess the host body yet. He doesn't have much longer."

"Why not?"

"Because a body starts dying the moment it's untenanted. Irreversible death processes start if a mind isn't at least dormant in the body. The mind is essential. Even an unconscious mind controls the automatic processes. But with no mind at all—"

"Still nothing!" the doctor shouted.

THE body of Fitzsimmons suddenly writhed against the straps. His back arched until they could hear the dry cracking of his spine. His hands wrenched at the arms of the chair and blood spouted from his nose, eyes and ears. Then his body sagged back.

"Reverse the process!" the doctor screamed. "Put Mr. Reilly back in his own body!"

The technicians turned to their dials, and the doctor, his face fiery red, bent over Reilly.

"I think it's too late now," Marie Thorne whispered.

"A tremor!" the doctor said. "I felt a tremor."

There was a long silence.

"I think he's back in!" the doctor exclaimed. "Now, oxygen, adrenalin!"

A mask was fitted over Reilly's face. A hypodermic was slipped

into his arm. He stirred, shivered, slumped back, stirred again.

"He's made it!" the doctor cried, removing the oxygen mask.

The directors, as though on cue, hurried out of their chairs and went up on the stage. They surrounded Reilly, who was now blinking his eyes and retching.

"We'll try another host, Mr. Reilly."

"Welcome back, sir!"

"Had us worried, Mr. Reilly!"

Reilly stared at them. He wiped his mouth and said, "My name is not Reilly."

The red-faced doctor pushed his way through the directors and bent down beside him.

"Not Reilly?" he said. "Are you Fitzsimmons?"

"No. I'm not Fitzsimmons, that poor damned fool! And I'm not Reilly. Reilly and I both tried to enter Fitzsimmons' body, and we ruined it. Then Reilly tried to get back into his own body, but I was too quick. I got into the body first. It's my body now."

"Who are you?" the doctor snapped.

The man stood up. The directors stepped away from him, and one man quickly crossed himself.

"It was dead too long," Marie Thorne said.

The face now bore only the faintest and most stylized resemblance to the pale, frightened mon-

key face of Reilly. There was nothing of his determination, petulance and good humor in that face. It resembled nothing but itself.

IT was a dead-white face except for black dots of stubble on its cheeks and jaw. The lips were bloodless. A strand of wispy hair was plastered against its cold white forehead. When Reilly had been in residence, the features had blended pleasantly, harmoniously. But now the individual features had coarsened and grown separate.

The unharmonious white face had a thick and unfinished look, like iron before tempering or clay before firing. It had a slack, sullen, relaxed look because of the lack of muscle tone and tension in the face. The calm, flaccid, unharmonious features simply existed, revealing nothing of the personality behind them. The face seemed no longer completely human. All humanity now resided in the great, patient, unblinking Buddha's eyes.

"It's gone zombie," Marie Thorne whispered, clinging to Blaine's shoulder.

"Who are you?" the doctor asked.

"I don't remember," it said. "I don't remember at all." Slowly it turned and started walking down the stage. Two directors moved to bar its path.

"Leave him alone," the govern-

ment man said. "Don't touch him."

"But someone is in Mr. Reilly's body!" a director objected. "We must find out who."

"You know the law," said the government man. "The possessor of a body is the sole arbiter of its movements. Stand aside."

"Leave the poor zombie alone," the doctor said wearily.

The directors moved out of its way. The zombie walked to the end of the stage, descended the steps, turned, and walked over to Blaine.

"I know you!" it said.

"What? What do you want?" Blaine stammered nervously.

"I don't remember," the zombie said, staring hard at him. "What's your name?"

"Tom Blaine."

THE zombie shook its head. "Doesn't mean anything to me. But I'll remember. It's you, all right. Something . . . My body's dying, isn't it? Too bad. I'll remember before it gives out. You and me, you know, together. Blaine, don't you remember me?"

"No!" Blaine shouted, shrinking from the suggested relationship, the idea of some vital link between him and this dying thing. It couldn't be! What shared secret was this thief of corpses, this unclean usurper hinting at, what black intimacy, what sniggering knowledge to be shared like a

dirty crust of bread for just Blaine and himself?

Nothing, Blaine told himself. He knew himself, knew what he was, knew what he had been. Nothing like this could arise legitimately to confront him. The creature had to be crazy, or mistaken.

"Who are you?" Blaine asked.

"I don't know!" The zombie flung his hands into the air, like a man caught in a net.

Blaine sensed how his mind must feel, confused, disoriented, nameless, wanting to live and caught in the fleshy dying embrace of a zombie body.

"I'll see you again," the zombie said to Blaine. "You're important to me. I'll see you again and I'll remember about you and me."

The zombie representative came forward, took the new zombie's hand and led him down the aisle and out of the theater. Blaine stared after them until he felt a sudden weight on his shoulder.

Marie Thorne had fainted. It was the most feminine thing she had done so far.

VI

THE head technician and the bearded doctor were arguing near the reincarnation machine, with their assistants ranged respectfully behind them. The battle was quite technical, but Blaine gathered that they were trying to de-

termine the cause of the reincarnation failure. Each seemed to feel that the fault lay in the other's province.

The old doctor insisted that the machine settings must have been faulty, or an uncompensated power drop had occurred. The head technician swore the machine was perfect. He felt certain that Reilly hadn't been physically fit for the strenuous attempt.

Neither would yield an inch. But, being reasonable men, they soon reached a compromise solution. The fault, they decided, lay in the nameless spirit who had fought Reilly for possession of his body, and had supplanted him.

"But who was it?" the head technician asked. "A ghost, do you think?"

"Possibly," the doctor said, "though it's damned rare for a ghost to possess a living body. Still, he talked crazy enough to be a ghost."

"Whoever he was," said the head technician, "he took over too late. The body was definitely zombie. Anyhow, no one could be blamed for it."

"Right," the doctor agreed. "I'll certify to the apparent soundness of the equipment."

"Fair enough," said the head technician. "And I'll testify to the apparent soundness of the patient."

They exchanged looks of perfect understanding.

The directors were holding an immediate conference of their own, trying to determine what the short-range effects would be upon the Rex corporate structure, and how the announcement should be made to the public, and whether all Rex personnel should be given a day off to visit the Reilly Family Palace of Death.

Then they noticed Blaine. Lowering their voices, they began to whisper together, glancing at him covertly.

Fitzsimmons' body lay back in its chair, beginning to stiffen, wearing a detached, derisive smile.

Marie Thorne recovered consciousness and promptly took in the situation. "Come on," she said, leading Blaine out of the theater. They hurried down long gray corridors to a street door. Outside, she hailed a helicab and gave the driver an address.

"Where are we going?" Blaine asked, as the helicab climbed.

"I'm not sure. Rex is going to be a madhouse for a while." She began fussing with her hair. "I don't know what the directors wanted to do with you, but it's lucky the government man was there. Let me think a moment."

BLAINÉ settled back against the cushions and looked down on the glittering city. From that height, it looked like an exquisite miniature, a multi-colored mosaic

from the Thousand and One Nights. But somewhere down there, walking the streets and levels, was the zombie, trying to remember — him.

"But why me?" Blaine asked out loud.

Marie Thorne glanced at him. "Why you and the zombie? Well, why not? Haven't you ever made any mistakes?"

"I suppose I have. But they're finished and done with."

She shook her head. "Maybe mistakes ended for good in your time. Today nothing ever dies for certain. That's one of the great disadvantages of a life after death, you know. One's mistakes sometimes refuse to lie decently dead and buried. Sometimes they follow you around."

"So I see," Blaine said. "But I've never done anything that would bring up *that*!"

She shrugged indifferently. "In that case, you're better than most of us."

Never had she seemed more alien to him.

The helicab began a slow descent. And Blaine brooded over the disadvantages inherent in all advantages.

In his own time, he had seen the control of disease in the world's backward areas result in an exploding birth rate, famine, misery. He had seen nuclear power breed nuclear war. Every advan-

tage generated its own specific disadvantages. Why should it be different today?

A certified scientific hereafter was undoubtedly an advantage to the race. Manipulation had again caught up with theory. But the disadvantages . . .

There was a certain inevitable weakening of the protective barrier around mundane life, some rips in the curtain, a few holes in the dike. The dead refused to lie decently still; they insisted upon mingling with the quick. To whose advantage? Ghosts, too—undoubtedly logical, operating within the boundaries of known natural laws. But that might be cold comfort to a haunted man.

Today, Blaine thought, whole new strata of existence impinged upon Man's existence on Earth. Just as the zombie impinged uncomfortably upon *his* existence.

Marie Thorne had been thinking hard. She said, "You should stay out of sight a while, until Rex quiets down. I'm going to introduce you to a man. I don't know him very well, but I've been told he's reliable."

Blaine silently wondered if *she* was reliable. Perhaps not. Perhaps this was a Rex scheme to get rid of him without the knowledge of the government man. But he had no friends in this world, no money, no knowledge. He would have to play along.

But that didn't mean he had to trust anyone.

The helicab landed on a busy street corner. Marie Thorne paid and hurried him into the crowds.

AT first glance, the city looked like a surrealistic Bagdad. He saw squat palaces of white and blue tile, and slender red minarets, and irregularly shaped buildings with flaring Chinese roofs and spired onion domes. It looked as though an Oriental fad in architecture had swept the city. Blaine could hardly believe he was in New York. Bombay perhaps, Moscow, or even Los Angeles. But not New York. With relief, he saw skyscrapers, simple and direct against the curved Asiatic structures. They seemed like lonely sentinels of the New York he had known.

The streets were filled with miniature traffic. Blaine saw motorcycles and scooters, cars no bigger than Porsches, trucks the size of Buicks, and nothing larger. He wondered if this was New York's answer to congestion and air pollution. If so, it hadn't helped.

Most of the traffic was overhead. There were vane- and jet-operated vehicles, aerial produce trucks and one-man speedsters, helicopter taxis and floating buses labeled "Skyport 2nd Level" or "Express to Montauk." Glittering dots marked the vertical and hori-

zontal lanes within which the traffic glided, banked, turned, ascended and descended. Flashing red, green, yellow and blue lights seemed to regulate the flow.

There were rules and conventions; but to Blaine's inexperienced eye, it was a vast fluttering confusion.

Fifty feet overhead there was another shopping level. How did people get up there? For that matter, how did anyone live and retain his sanity in this noisy, bright, congested machine? The human density was overpowering. He felt as though he were being drowned in a sea of flesh. What was the population of this super-city? Fifteen million? Twenty million? It made the New York of 1958 look like a country village. He stared around him, his head pounding dully and his eyes beginning to unfocus.

In a few moments, he was in control of himself again, and slightly more respectful of his strong, phlegmatic body. Perhaps a man from the past needed just that sort of fleshy envelope if he wanted to view the future with equanimity. A low-order nervous system had its advantages.

He noticed a group of people standing in a line. The men and women on it were poorly dressed, unkempt, unwashed. They shared a common look of sullen despair.

Was it a breadline?

He asked Marie where the line was going.

"To the suicide booths," she told him, hurrying him past it.

It was, Blaine decided, a hell of an inauspicious thing to see on his first real day in the future. Suicide booths! Well, he would never enter one willingly, he could be absolutely sure of that. Things surely couldn't get *that* bad.

But what kind of world had suicide booths? And free ones, to judge by the clientele . . .

He would have to be careful about accepting free gifts in this world.

BLAINÉ walked on with Marie, gawking at the sights and slowly growing accustomed to the bright, hectic, boisterous, overcrowded city.

They came to an enormous building shaped like a Gothic castle, with pennants flying from its upper battlements. On its highest tower was a brilliant green light fully visible against the fading afternoon sun. It looked like an important landmark.

A man was leaning against the building, lighting a thin cigar. He seemed to be the only man in New York not in a tearing hurry. Marie walked over to him.

"Mr. Orc?"

"Yes, Miss Thorne."

"This is Tom Blaine. I'd like you to take care of him."

"Sure," Orc said.

"I'll make further arrangements with you later. Now I must get back. Good luck," she said to Blaine, and hurried away.

Blaine and Orc faced each other in mutual embarrassment. To break the silence, Blaine asked, "What is this building?"

"This," Orc said, "is the headquarters of Hereafter, Incorporated." He was a tall man, very thin, with a long, mournful, weatherbeaten face. His eyes were narrow and direct. His clothes hung awkwardly on him, as though he were more used to levis than tailored slacks. Blaine thought he looked like a Westerner.

"Impressive," Blaine said, gazing up at the Gothic castle.

"Gaudy," said Orc. "You aren't from the city, are you?"

Blaine shook his head.

"Me neither. But frankly, Blaine, I thought everybody on Earth and all the planets knew about the Hereafter building. Do you mind my asking where you're from?"

"Not at all," Blaine said, his mind racing. He wondered if he should announce himself a man from the past. No, it was hardly the thing to tell a possibly untrustworthy stranger, particularly in view of the situation at Rex. He'd better be from somewhere else.

Blaine said, "I'm from—Brazil."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Upper Amazon Valley. My folks went there when I was a kid. Rubber plantation. Dad just died, so I thought I'd have a look at New York."

"I hear it's still pretty wild down there," Orc said.

Blaine nodded, relieved that his story wasn't being questioned. But maybe it wasn't a very strange story for this day and age. In any event, he had found a home for himself.

ORC said, "I'm from Mexican Hat, Arizona. Carl Orc's the name. I came here to cast a look around this New York and find out what they're always boasting about. It's interesting enough, but these folks are just a little too up and roaring for me, if you catch my meaning. I don't mean to say we're poky back home. We're not. But these people bounce around like an ape with a stick in his line."

"I know just what you mean," Blaine said.

For a few minutes, they discussed the jittery, frantic, compulsive habits of New Yorkers, comparing them with the sane, calm, pastoral life in Mexican Hat and the Upper Amazon Valley. These people, they agreed, just didn't know how to live.

"Blaine," said Orc, "business and pleasure *can* mix. What say we get ourselves a drink?"

Blaine hesitated, wondering how he would talk with Orc; then he remembered that he could plead Brazil and inadequate schooling to excuse his lack of present-day knowledge.

"Fine," he said.

"Then let us proceed," said Orc somberly, "to inspect the internal nocturnal movements of this edgy little old town."

It was, Blaine decided, as good a way as any other of finding out about the future. After all, nothing could be more revealing than what people did for pleasure. Through games and drunkenness, Man exhibits his essential attitudes toward his environment, and shows his disposition toward the questions of life, death, fate and free will.

What better symbol of Rome than the circus? What better crystallization of the American West than the rodeo? Spain had its bull-fights and Norway its ski-jumps. What sport, recreation or pastime would similarly reveal the New York of 2110? He would find out. And, surely, to experience this in all its immediacy was better than reading about it in some dusty library, and infinitely more entertaining.

"Suppose we have a look at the Martian Quarter?" Carl Orc suggested.

"Lead away," Blaine said, well pleased at the chance to combine pleasure with stern necessity.

BLAINE followed through a maze of streets and levels, through underground arcades and overhead ramps, by foot, escalator, subway and helicab. The interlocking complexity of streets and levels didn't impress the lean Westerner. Phoenix was laid out in the same way, he said, although admittedly on a smaller scale.

They went to a small restaurant that called itself the Red Mars and advertised a genuine South Martian cuisine. Blaine had to confess he had never eaten Martian food. Orc had sampled it several times in Phoenix.

"It's pretty good," he told Blaine, "but you're hungry an hour later."

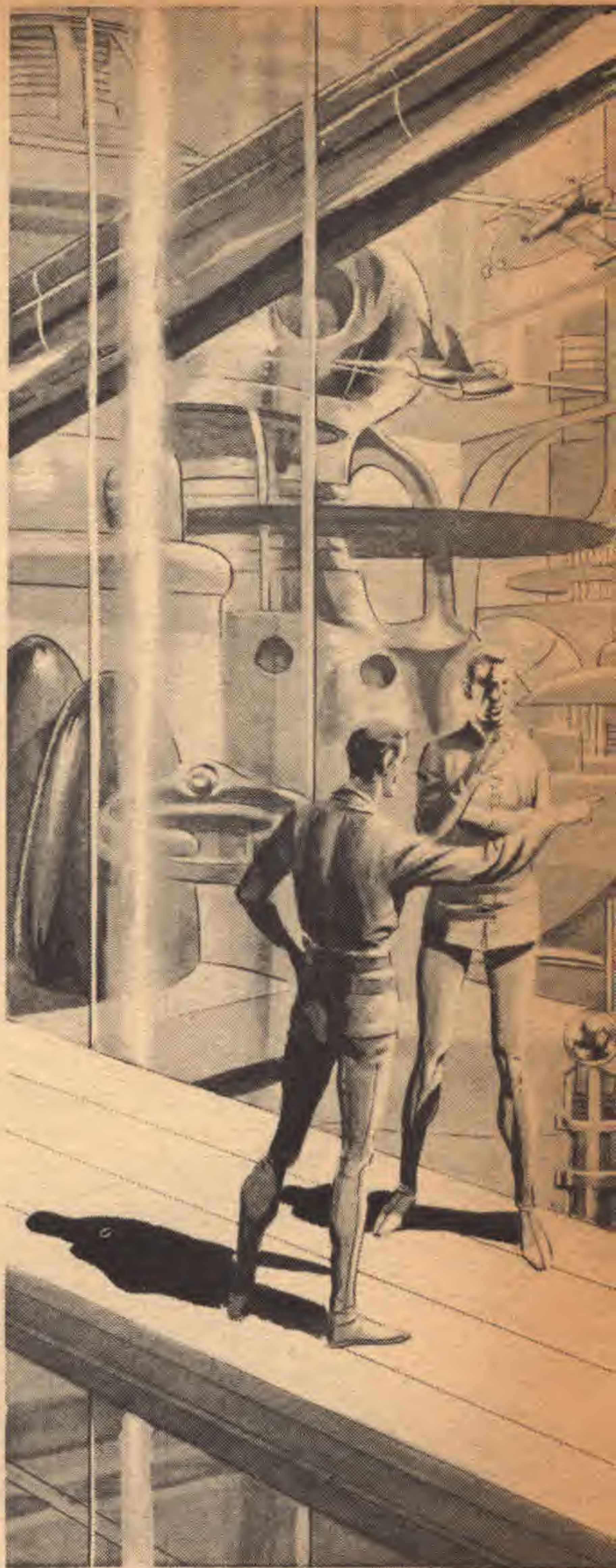
The menu was written entirely in Martian, and no English translation was included. Blaine recklessly ordered the Number One Combination, as did Orc. It came, a strange-looking mess of shredded vegetables and bits of meat. Blaine tasted, and nearly dropped his fork in surprise.

"It's exactly like Chinese food!"

"Well, of course," Orc said. "The Chinese were the first on Mars—in '97, I think. So anything they eat up there is Martian food. Right?"

"I suppose so," Blaine said.

"Besides, this stuff is made with genuine Martian-grown vegetables and mutated herbs and spices. Or so they claim."





Blaine didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. With good appetite, he ate the C'kyo-Ourher, which tasted just like shrimp chow mein, and the Trrdxat, or egg roll.

"Why do they give it such weird names?" Blaine asked, ordering the Hggshrt for dessert.

"Man, you're really out of touch!" Orc said, laughing. "Those Martian Chinese went all the way. They translated the Martian rock-carvings and suchlike, and started to talk Martian—with a strong Cantonese accent, I reckon — but there wasn't no one around to tell them different. They talk Martian, dress Martian, think Martian. You call one of them a Chinese now, he'd up and hit you. He's a *Martian*, boy!"

The Hggshrt came, and turned out to be an almond cookie.

Orc paid the check. As they left, Blaine asked, "Are there many Martian laundries?"

"Hell, yes. Country's filled with them."

"I thought so," Blaine said, and paid a silent tribute to the Martian Chinese and their firm grip on traditional institutions.

THEY caught a helicab to the Greens Club, a place that Orc's Phoenix friends had told him not to miss. This small, expensive, intimate little club was world-famous, an absolute must for any

visitor to New York. For the Greens Club was unique in presenting an all-vegetable floor show.

They were given seats on a little balcony, not far from the glass-fenced center of the club. Three levels of tables surrounded the center, and brilliant spotlights played upon it. Behind the glass fence was what looked like a few square yards of jungle, growing in a nutrient solution. An artificial breeze stirred the plants, which were packed tight together, and varied widely in size, shape and hue.

They behaved like no plants Blaine had ever seen. They grew rapidly, fantastically, from tiny seeds and root tendrils to great shrubs and rough-barked trees, squat ferns, monstrous flowers, dripping green fungus and speckled vines; grew and quickly completed their life-cycle and fell into decay, casting forth their seeds to begin again.

But no species seemed able to reproduce itself. Sports and mutants sprang from the seeds and swollen fruit, altered and adapted to the fierce environment, battled for root space below and air space above, and struggled toward the artificial suns that glowed above them. Unsuccessful shrubs quickly molded themselves into parasites, clung to the choked trees, and discovered new adaptations clinging to them in turn.

Sometimes, in a burst of creative ambition, a plant would surmount all obstacles, put down the growths around it, strangle the opposition, conquer all. But new species already grew from its body, pulled it down and squabbled over the corpse. Sometimes a blight, itself vegetable, would attack the jungle and carry everything before it in a grand crescendo of mold. But a courageous sport would at last take root in it, then another, and on went the fight.

The plants changed, grew larger or smaller, transcended themselves in the struggle for survival. But no amount of determination, no cunning, no transcendence helped. No species could prevail, and every endeavor led to death.

Blaine found the spectacle disturbing. Could this fatalistic pageant of the world be the significant characteristic of 2110?

"It's really something," Orc told him, "what these New York labs can do with quick-growing mutants. It's a freak show, of course. They just speed up the growing rate, force a contra-survival situation, throw in some radiation, and let the best plant try to win. I hear these plants use up their growth potential in about twenty hours and have to be replaced."

"So that's where it ends," Blaine said, watching the tortured but ever-optimistic jungle. "In replacements."

"Sure," said Orc, blandly avoiding all philosophical complications. "They can afford it, the prices they charge here. But it's freak stuff. Let me tell you about the sandplants we grow in Arizona."

BLAINE sipped his whiskey and watched the jungle growing, dying and renewing itself. Orc was saying, "Right on the burning face of the desert. Fact. We've finally adapted fruit and vegetable-bearing plants to real desert conditions, without increasing their bulk water supply, and at a price which allows us to compete with the fertile areas. I tell you, boy, in another fifty years the entire concept of *fertile* is going to change. Take Mars, for example..."

They left the Greens Club and worked their way from bar to bar, toward Times Square. Orc was showing a certain difficulty in focusing, but his voice was steady as he talked about the lost Martian secret of growing on sand. "Someday," he promised Blaine, "we'll figure out how they produced the sandplants without the added nutrients and moisture-fixatives."

Blaine had drunk enough to put his former body into a coma twice over. But his bulky new body seemed to have an inexhaustible capacity for whiskey. It was a pleasant change to have a body

that could hold its liquor. Not, he added hastily, that such a rudimentary ability could offset the body's disadvantages.

They crossed Times Square's garish confusion and entered a bar on 44th Street. As their drinks were served, a furtive-eyed little man in a raincoat stepped up to them.

"Hey, boys," he said tentatively.

"Whatcha want, podner?" Orc asked.

"You boys out looking for a little fun?"

"You might say so," Orc said expansively. "And we can find it ourselves, thank you kindly."

The little man smiled nervously. "You can't find what *I'm* offering," he said. "Not if you walked these streets all night. You can find plenty of bars and shag joints and dog kennels and rundowns, and there's a couple of greasy mirandas on the corner, if you want that. But you can't find what *I'm* offering."

"Speak up, little friend," Orc said. "What exactly are you offering?"

"Well, boys, it's — hold it! Flat-hats!"

Two blue-uniformed policemen entered the bar, looked around and left.

"Okay," Blaine said. "What is it?"

"Call me Joe," said the little man with an ingratiating grin. "I'm

a steerer for a Transplant game, friends. The best game and highest jump in town!"

"What in hell is Transplant?" Blaine asked.

ORC and Joe both looked at him. Joe said, "Wow, friend, no insult but you must *really* be from down on the farm. Never heard of Transplant? Well, I'll be griped!"

"All right, so I'm a farmboy," Blaine growled, thrusting his fierce, square, hard-planed face close to Joe's. "What is Transplant?"

"Not so loud!" Joe whispered, shrinking back. "Take it easy, farmer, I'll explain. Transplant is the new switch game, buddy. Are you tired of living? Think you've had all the kicks? Wait till you try Transplant. You see, farmer, folks in the know say that straight sex is pretty moldy potatoes. Don't get me wrong, it's fine for the birds and the bees and the beasts and the brutes. It still brings a thrill to their simple animal hearts, and who are we to say they're wrong? As a means of propagating the species, old nature's little sex gimmick is still the first and the best. But for real kicks, sophisticated people are turning to Transplant."

"Transplant is democratic, friends. It gives you the big chance to switch over into someone else and feel how the other ninety-

nine per cent feels. It's educational, you might say, and it takes up where straight sex leaves off. Ever get the urge to be a high-strung Latin, pal? You can, with Transplant. Ever wonder what a genuine sadist feels? Tune in with Transplant. And there's more, more, so much more! For example, why be a man all your life? You've proved your point by now; why belabor it?"

"Voyeurism," Blaine spat.

"I know them big words," Joe said, "and it ain't true. This is no Peeping Tom's game. With Transplant, *you are there*, right in the old corpus, moving those exotic muscles, experiencing those sensations. Ever get the urge to be a tiger, farmboy, and go loping after a lady tiger in the old mating season? We got a tiger, friend, and a lady tiger too. Ever ask yourself what thrill a man could possibly find in flagellation, shoe-fetichism, necrophilia, or the like? Find out with Transplant. Our catalogue of bodies reads like an encyclopedia. You can't go wrong at Transplant, friends, and our prices are set ridiculously—"

"Get out," Blaine said.

"What, buddy?"

Blaine's big hand shot out and grabbed Joe by the raincoat front. He lifted the little pusher to eye level and glared at him.

"You take your perverted little notions out of here," Blaine said.

"Guys like you have been selling off-beat kicks since the days of Babylon, and guys like me haven't been buying. Get out, before I break your neck for a quick sadistic thrill."

He released him.

JOE smoothed his raincoat and smiled shakily. "No offense, buddy. I'm going. Don't feel like it tonight? There's always another night. Transplant's in your future, farmboy. Why fight it?"

Blaine started to move forward, but Orc held him back. The little pusher scuttled out the door.

"He isn't worth dropping," Orc said. "The flathats would just take you in. It's a sad, sick, dirty world, friend. Drink up."

Blaine threw down his whiskey, still seething. Transplant! If that was the characteristic amusement of 2110, he wanted no part of it. Orc was right, it was a sad, sick, dirty world. Even the whiskey was beginning to taste funny.

He grabbed at the bar for support. The whiskey tasted very funny. What was wrong with him? The stuff seemed to be going to his head.

Orc's arm was around his shoulder. He was saying, "Well, well, my old buddy's taken himself that one too many. Guess I'd better cart him back to his hotel."

But Orc didn't know where his hotel was. He didn't even have a

hotel to be taken to. Orc — that damned quick-talking straight-eyed Orc must have put something in his drink while he was talking to Joe.

In order to roll him? But Orc knew he had no money. Why then?

He tried to shake the arm off his shoulders. It was clamped in place like an iron bar.

"Don't worry," Orc was saying, "I'll take care of you, old buddy."

The barroom revolved lazily around Blaine's head. He had a sudden realization that he was going to find out a great deal about 2100 by the dubious method of direct experience. Too much, he suspected. Perhaps a dusty library would have been better, after all.

The barroom began to revolve more rapidly.

He passed out.

VII

BLAINÉ recovered consciousness in a small, dimly lighted room with no furniture, no doors or windows, and only a single screened ventilation outlet in the ceiling. The floors and walls were thickly padded, but the padding hadn't been washed in a long time. It stank.

Blaine sat up, and two red-hot needles stabbed him through the eyes. He lay down again.

"Relax," a voice said. "These

knock drops take a while to wear off."

He was not alone in the padded room. There was a man sitting in a corner, watching him. The man was wearing only shorts. Glancing at himself, Blaine saw that he was similarly dressed.

He sat up slowly and propped himself against a wall. For a moment, he was afraid his head would explode. Then, as the needles drove viciously in, he was afraid it wouldn't.

"What is this?" he asked.

"End of the line," the man said cheerfully. "They boxed you, just like me. They boxed you and brought you in like *fabrit*. Now all they got to do is crate you and label you."

Blaine couldn't understand what the man was saying. He was in no mood to decipher 2100 slang. Clutching his head, he said, "I don't have any money. Why did they box me?"

"Come off it," the man said. "Why *would* they box you? They want your body, man!"

"My body?"

"Right. For a host."

A host body, Blaine thought, such as he was now occupying. Well, of course. Naturally. It was obvious when you came to think about it. This age needed a supply of host bodies for various and sundry purposes. But how do you get a host body? They don't grow

on trees, nor can you dig for them. You get them from people. Most people wouldn't take kindly to selling their own bodies; life is so meaningless without one. Then how to fill the supply?

Easy. You pick out a sucker, dope him, hide him away, extract his mind, then take his body.

It was an interesting line of speculation, but Blaine couldn't continue it any longer. It seemed as though his head had finally decided to explode.

LATER, the hangover subsided. Blaine sat up and found a sandwich in front of him on a paper plate, and a cup of some dark beverage.

"It's safe to eat," the man told him. "They take good care of us. I hear the going black market price for a body is close to four thousand dollars."

"Black market?"

"Man, what's wrong with you? Wake up! You know there's a black market in bodies just like there's an open market in bodies."

Blaine sipped the dark beverage, which turned out to be coffee. The man introduced himself as Ray Melhill, a flow-control man off the spaceship *Bremen*. He was about Blaine's age, a compact, red-headed, snub-nosed man with slightly protruding teeth. Even in his present predicament, he carried himself with a certain jaunty

assurance, the unquenchable confidence of a man for whom something always turns up. His freckled skin was very white except for a small red blotch on his neck, the result of an old radiation burn.

"I should have known better," Melhill said. "But we'd been transiting for three months on the asteroid run and I wanted a spree. I would have been fine if I'd stuck with the boys, but we got separated. So I wound up in a dog kennel with a greasy miranda. She knocked my drink and I wound up here."

Melhill leaned back, his hands locked behind his head. "Me, of all people! I was always telling the boys to watch out. Stick with the gang, I was always telling them. You know, I don't mind the thought of dying so much. I just hate the idea of those bastards giving my body to some dirty fat decrepit old slob so he can play around for another fifty years. That's what kills me, the thought of some slob wearing my body!"

Blaine nodded somberly.

"So that's my tale of woe," Melhill said, growing cheerful again. "What's yours?"

"Mine's a pretty long one," Blaine said, "and a trifle wild in spots. Do you want to hear it all?"

"Sure. Plenty of time. I hope."

"Okay. It starts in the year 1958. Wait, don't interrupt me. I was driving my car . . ."

WHEN he had finished, Blaine leaned back against the padded wall and took a deep breath. "Do you believe me?"

"Why not? Nothing so new about time travel. It's just illegal and expensive. And those Rex boys would pull anything."

"The Rex girls, too," Blaine said, and Melhill grinned.

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Then Blaine asked, "So they're going to use us for host bodies?"

"That's the score."

"When?"

"When a customer totters in. I've been here a week, close as I can figure. Either of us might be taken any second. Or it might not come for another week or two."

"And they just wipe our minds out?"

Melhill nodded.

"But that's murder!"

"It sure is," Melhill agreed. "Hasn't happened yet, though. Maybe the flatheads will pull a raid."

"I doubt it."

"Me too. Have you got hereafter insurance? Maybe you'll survive after death."

"I don't believe in that stuff."

"You don't? But life after death is a fact."

"Get off it," Blaine said sourly.

"It is! Scientific fact!"

Blaine stared hard at the young spaceman. "Ray," he said, "how

about filling me in? Brief me on what's happened since 1958."

"That's a big order," Melhill said, "and I'm not what you'd call an educated guy."

"Just give me a rough sketch. What's this hereafter stuff? And reincarnation and host bodies? What's *happening*?"

Melhill leaned back and pursed his lips, squinting. "Well, let's see. They put a ship on the Moon somewhere around 1960, and landed on Mars about ten years later. Then we had that quickie war with Russia over the asteroids — strictly a deep-space affair. Or was it with China?"

"Never mind," Blaine said. "What about reincarnation and life after death?"

"I'll try to give it to you like they gave it to me in high school. I had a course called Survey of Psychic Survival, but that was a long time ago. Let's see."

MELHILL frowned in deep concentration. "Quote. 'Since earliest times, Man has sensed the presence of an invisible spirit world, and has suspected that he himself will participate in that world after the death of his body.' Unquote. I guess you know all about that early stuff. The Egyptians and Chinese and the European alchemists and those. So I'll skip to Rhine. He lived in your time. He was investigating psychic

phenomena at Duke. Ever hear of him?"

"Sure," Blaine said. "What did he discover?"

"Nothing, as a matter of fact. But he got the ball rolling. Then Kralski took over the work at Vilna and shoved it ahead some. That was 1987, the year the Pirates won their first World Series. Around 2000, there was Von Leddner at the University of California. Very important figure, Von Leddner. Outlined the general theory of the hereafter, but didn't have any proofs. And finally we come to Professor Michael Vanning.

"Professor Vanning is the boy who pinned it all down. He *proved* that people survive after death. Contacted them, talked with them, recorded them, all that stuff. Offered absolute sure-enough concrete scientific proof of life after death. So of course there were big arguments about it, a lot of religious talk. Controversy. Headlines. A big-time professor from Harvard named James Archer Flynn set out to prove the whole thing was a hoax. He and Vanning argued back and forth for years.

"By this time, Vanning was an old man and he decided to take the plunge. He sealed a lot of stuff in a safe, hid things here and there, scattered some code words and promised to come back, like Houdini said but didn't. Then—"

"Pardon me," Blaine interrupted, "if there is life after death, why didn't Houdini come back?"

"It's very simple, but please, one thing at a time. Anyhow, Vanning killed himself, leaving a long suicide note about Man's immortal spirit and the indomitable progress of the human race. It's reprinted in a lot of anthologies. Later they found out it was ghost-written, but that's another story. Where was I?"

"He killed himself."

"Right. And damned if he didn't contact Professor James Archer Flynn after dying, and tell him where to find all that hidden stuff, the code words, and so forth. That clinched it, buddy. Life after death was *in*."

RAY Melhill stood up, stretched, and sat down again. "The Vanning Institute," he said, "warned everybody against hysteria. But hysteria there was. The next fifteen years are known as the Crazy Forties."

Melhill grinned and licked his lips. "Wish I'd been around then. Everybody just sort of let go. 'Doesn't matter what you do,' the jingle ran, 'pie in the sky is waitin' for *you*.' Saint or sinner, bad or good, everybody gets a slice. The murderer walks into the hereafter just like the archbishop. So live it up, boys and girls, enjoy the flesh on Earth while you're here, 'cause

you'll get plenty of spirit after death. Yep, and they really lived it up. Anarchy.

"A new religion popped up calling itself Realization. It started telling people that they owed it to themselves to experience *everything*, good or bad, fair and foul, because the hereafter was just a long remembrance of what you did on Earth. So *do it*, they said, that's what you're put on Earth for, *do it*, or you'll be short-changed in the afterlife. Gratify every desire, satisfy every lust, explore your blackest depths. Live high, die high.

"It was wacky. The real fanatics formed torture clubs, and wrote encyclopedias on pain, and collected tortures like a housewife would collect recipes. At each meeting, a member would voluntarily present himself as a victim and they'd kill him in the most excruciating damned ways they could find. They wanted to experience the absolute most in pleasure and pain. And I guess they did."

Melhill wiped his forehead and said more sedately, "I've done a little reading on the Crazy Years."

"So I see," Blaine said.

"It's sort of interesting stuff. But then came the crusher. The Vanning Institute had been experimenting all this time. Around 2050, when the Crazy Years were in full swing, they announced that

there was a hereafter, sure enough; *but not for everyone.*"

Blaine blinked, but made no comment.

"A real crusher. The Vanning Institute said they had certain proof that only about one person in a million got into the hereafter. The rest, the millions and millions, just went out like a light when they died. Pouf! No more. No afterlife. Nothing."

"Why?" Blaine wanted to know.

"Well, Tom, I'm none too clear on that part myself," Melhill told him. "If you asked me something about flow-mechanics, I could really tell you something; but psychic theory isn't my field. So try to stick with me while I struggle through it. It goes something like this."

HE rubbed his forehead vigorously. "What survives or doesn't survive after death is the mind. People have been arguing for thousands of years about what a mind is, and where and how it interacts with the body, and so forth. We haven't got all the answers, but we do have some working definitions. Nowadays, the mind is considered a high-tension energy web that emanates from the body, is modified by the body, and itself modifies the body. Got that?"

"I think so. Go on."

"So, the way I got it, the mind

and body interact and intermodify. But the mind can also exist independently of the body. According to a lot of scientists, the independent mind is the next stage of evolution. In a million years, they say, we won't even need a body except maybe for a brief incubation period. Personally, I don't think this lousy race will survive another million years. It damn well doesn't deserve to."

"At the moment, I agree with you, though subject to change without notice," Blaine said. "But get back to the hereafter."

"We've got this high-tension energy web. When the body dies, that web *should* be able to go on existing, like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon. Death is simply the process that hatches the mind from the body. But it doesn't work that way because of the death trauma. Some scientists think the death trauma is nature's ejecting mechanism, to get the mind free of the body. But it works too hard and louses up everything. Dying is a tremendous psychic shock, and most of the time the energy web gets disrupted, ripped all to hell. It can't pull itself together, it dissipates, and you're completely dead."

Blaine said, "So that's why Houdini didn't come back."

"I wouldn't say for sure in any individual case, just statistically. A lot of people did some heavy

thinking and that ended the Crazy Years. The Vanning Institute went on working. They studied Yoga and stuff like that, but on a scientific basis. Some of those Eastern religions had the right idea, you know. Strengthen the mind. That's what the Institute wanted: a way to strengthen the energy web so it would survive the death process."

"And they found it?"

"In spades. Along about that time, they changed their name to Hereafter, Inc."

Blaine nodded. "I passed their building today. Hey, wait a minute! You say they solved the mind-strengthening problem? Then no one dies! Everyone survives after death!"

MELHILL grinned sardonically. "Don't be a farmer, Tom. You think they give it away free? Not a chance. It's a complex electro-chemical treatment, pal, and they charge for it. They charge *plenty*."

"So only the rich go to heaven," Blaine said.

"Can't have just *anyone* crashing in."

"Sure, sure," Blaine said. "But aren't there other ways, other mind-strengthening disciplines? What about Yoga? What about Zen?"

"They work," Melhill said. "There are at least a dozen government tested and approved

home-survival courses. Trouble is, it takes about twenty years of really hard work to become an adept. That's not for the ordinary guy. Nope, without the machines to help you, you're dead."

"And only Hereafter, Inc., has the machines?"

"There are two others, the Afterlife Academy and Heaven, Ltd., but the price stays about the same. The government's getting to work on some death-survival insurance, but it won't help us."

"I guess not," Blaine said.

The dream, for a moment, had been dazzling: a relief from mortal fears; the rational certainty of a continuance and existence after the body's death; the knowledge of an uninterrupted process of growth and fulfillment for his personality to its own limits—not the constricting limits of the frail fleshy envelope that heredity and chance had imposed on him.

But that was not to be. His mind's desire to expand was to be checked, rudely, finally. Tomorrow's promises were forever not for today.

"What about reincarnation and host bodies?" Blaine asked.

"You should know," Melhill told him. "They reincarnated you and put you in a host. There's nothing complicated about mind-switching, as the Transplant operators will gladly tell you. Transplant is only temporary oc-

cupancy, however, and doesn't involve full dislodgement of the original mind. Hosting is for keeps. First, the original mind must be wiped out. Second, it's a dangerous game for the mind attempting to enter the host body. Sometimes, you see, that mind can't penetrate the host and breaks itself up trying. Hereafter conditioning often won't stand up under a reincarnation attempt. If the mind doesn't make it into the host—blooey!"

BLAINE nodded. He asked, "Why would any man with hereafter insurance still make the attempt at reincarnation?"

"Because some old guys are afraid of dying," Melhill said. "They're afraid of the hereafter, scared of that spirit stuff. They want to stay right here on Earth where they know what's what. So they buy a body legally on the open market, if they can find a good one. If not, they buy one on the black market. One of *our* bodies, pal."

"The bodies on the open market are offered for sale voluntarily?"

"That's right."

"But who would sell his body?"

"A very poor guy, obviously. By law, he's supposed to receive compensation in addition to hereafter insurance for his body. In actual fact, he takes what he can get."

"A man would have to be crazy!"

"You think so?" Melhill retorted. "Today, like always, the world is filled with unskilled, sick, disease-ridden and starving people. And, like always, they all got families. Suppose a guy wants to buy food for his kids. His body is the only thing of value he has to sell. Back in your time, he didn't have anything at all to sell."

"Perhaps so," Blaine said. "But no matter how bad things got, I'd never sell my body."

Melhill laughed with easy good humor. "Stout fellow! But, Tom, they're taking it for nothing!"

Blaine could think of no answer for that.

VIII

TIME passed slowly in the padded cell. Blaine and Melhill were given books and magazines. They were fed often and well, out of paper cups and plates. They were closely watched, for no harm must come to their highly marketable bodies.

Blaine began to experience an exceeding fondness for the sturdy, thickset, well-muscled body he had acquired so recently, and from which he would be parted so soon. It was really an excellent body, he decided, a body to be proud of. True, it had no particular grace; but grace could be overestimated.

On the whole, all considerations

of mortality aside, it was not a body to be given up lightly.

One day, after they had eaten, a padded section of wall swung away. Looking in, protected by steel bars, was Carl Orc.

"Howdy," said Orc, tall, lean, direct-eyed, angular in his city clothes, "how's my Brazilian buddy?"

"You louse," Blaine said, with a deep sense of the inadequacy of words.

"Them's the breaks," said Orc. "You boys gettin' enough to eat?"

"You and your ranch in Arizona!"

"I've got one under option," Orc said. "Mean to retire there some day and raise sandplants. I reckon I know more about Arizona than many a native-born son. But ranches cost money, and hereafter insurance costs money. A man does what he can."

"And a vulture does what *he* can," Blaine snapped.

Orc sighed deeply. "Well, it's a business and I guess it's worse than some others I could think of, if I set my mind to it kinda hard. I'll probably regret all this sometime when I'm sitting on the front porch of my little desert ranch."

"You'll never get there," Blaine assured him.

"I won't?"

"No. One night a mark is going to catch you spiking his drink. You're going to end in the gutter,

Orc, with your head caved in. And that'll be the end of you."

"Only the end of my body," Orc corrected. "My soul will march on to that sweet life in the by and by. I've paid my money, boy, and heaven's my next home!"

"You don't deserve it!"

ORC grinned, and even Melhill couldn't conceal a smile. Orc said, "My poor Brazilian friend, there's no question of *deserving*. You should know better than that. Life after death just isn't for the meek and humble little people, no matter how worthy they are. It's the bright lad with the dollar in his pocket and his eyes open for number one whose soul marches on after death."

"I can't believe it," Blaine said. "It isn't fair. It isn't just."

"You're an idealist," said Orc interestedly, as though he were studying the world's last specimen of the breed.

"Call it what you like. Maybe you'll get your hereafter, Orc. But I think there's a tiny corner of it where you'll burn forever!"

Orc said, "There's no scientific evidence of hell-fire. On the other hand, there's a lot we don't know about the hereafter. Maybe I'll burn. And maybe there's even a factory up there in the blue where they'll reassemble your shattered

mind . . . But let's not argue. I'm sorry, I'm afraid the time's come."

Orc walked quickly away. The steel-barred door swung open and five men marched into the room.

"No!" Melhill screamed.

They closed in on the spaceman. Expertly they avoided his swinging fists and pinioned his arms. One of them pushed a gag in his mouth. They started to drag him out of the room.

Orc appeared again in the doorway, frowning. "Let go of him," he said.

The men released Melhill.

"You idiots got the wrong man," Orc told them. "It's *that* one." He pointed at Blaine.

Blaine had been trying to prepare himself for the loss of his friend. The abrupt reversal of fortune caught him open-mouthed and unready. The men seized him before he had time to react.

Blaine suddenly came to life and tried to wrench free. "I'll kill you!" he shouted at Orc. "I swear it, I'll kill you!"

"Don't damage him," Orc said to the men, wooden-faced.

A rag was pushed over Blaine's mouth and nose, and he smelled something sickeningly sweet that fogged his mind. His last recollection was of Melhill, his face ashen, standing at the barred door.

—ROBERT SHECKLEY

CONTINUED NEXT MONTH

Paramount Ulj

By AVRAM DAVIDSON

*We were being tested, no doubt
of it — but for what — and would
it be a promotion if we passed?*

IT was the Russians' own fault that they had picked that particular week to stage another walkout from the U.N. And, of course, all the Delegates of all the Peoples' Democracies had trotted obediently out behind them. Later on, the Outer Mongolians were to claim that Things Would Have Been Different If—

But that is very doubtful.

The vessel was spotted first from a fire observation tower in Yosemite, but by the time the

United States government had begun to act, the visitors had made a second landing — in Central Park. For a while, it was believed that there were two ships, but gradually it came to be realized that there was only one, that it had shown up in New York City as near instantaneously after vanishing from California as made no difference.

Prince Prhajhadiphong of Thai, his country's Permanent Delegate, was enjoying his usual morning

Illustrated by MARTINEZ

stroll when he rounded a corner in the path and saw the two visitors emerging from the charcoal-colored oval.

"Sunshine," said one of them to the Prince, who could never afterward recall which, an understandable lapse, since they were identical twins. H.H. the P.D. was always rather a wag, and it was only with a strong effort that he restrained himself from saying, "Moonshine," in reply to the uncommon greeting.

"And Sunshine to you," he said, bowing. The two men had kumquat-colored complexions, their Lifebuoy-pink hair was worn in a double loop over the right ear, and their clothes glittered and tinkled.

"Are you a person of consequence?" asked one, speaking as if he had (so the Prince thought to himself) a mouthful of hot rice.

"Oh, of very small consequence," the Prince murmured.

The second one observed, in what seemed an approving manner, "You are evidently using the Modest Opposite. If you were indeed what you say, then you would use the Assertive Opposite to aggrandize yourself." He turned to his twin. "Very early evidence of *ovlirb-tav*, eh, Smottleb?"

But Smottleb demurred. "Perhaps, Cumpaw, although he uses the Modest Opposite, it may be that he does so only to confuse us into thinking that he is *really*

only of a small consequence. Which would be no evidence at all of *ovlirb-tav*, would it?"

Smottleb considered this. Then he said, "Well, we must find out." They turned to the patient Thai and said in unison, "Take us to your Paramount Ulj."

"Certainly," said Prince Prhad-jhadiphong.

As he led the way to a taxi, he reminded himself that, as one who had spent a year in Bangkok's best Buddhist monastery, he should ever reflect that all is *Maya*, or illusion; and that *Maya* can take any form at all.

THE hastily created U.N. Committee to Welcome Interstellar Visitors consisted of American Ambassador Stuyvesant Lowell Lee, Dr. Mithra Parseebhooe of India, and — of course — the Prince himself.

"Which one of you is Paramount Ulj?" asked Cumpaw (or perhaps it was Smottleb).

"Hm," said the Prince, coughing delicately. "We three are temporarily exercising the functions of the Paramount Uljency. You may confide in us."

"Ah, you have not yet held Ordeal and Combat to select the late Paramount's successor, I assume. Well, well . . . I share your darkness. Was the deceased a man of good taste?" Smottleb asked (unless it was Cumpaw).

"Very," said the Prince, as his colleagues hesitated.

"Good. Then let us recline and talk," one visitor said, "of our Purpose here."

Their devotion to the cause of *ovlirb-tav* can be gauged by the fact that Earth was the sixty-first planet the twins had visited — and of the other sixty, only two had shown a sufficient grasp of this principle, which alone separates Man from the beasts.

"How to define this term?" one of them wondered aloud. "Politeness? Decency? Know-how? Civilization?"

"If you have it," the other said, "we share with you. Everything. We will have but one placenta, your people and ours — if you show *ovlirb-tav*. And if not, *pusht!* You may continue to cook in your own—"

Ambassador Lee asked, perhaps incautiously, "And how is this quality shown?"

He was informed that this would be learned soon enough. Pandit Parseebhooe suggested that Earth, too, might have something of value to share.

"Only if you have *ovlirb-tav*," said Smottleb or Cumpaw. "If not — *smersh!*"

Prince P. inquired where their home planet was, and they loftily told him that it was so far away that even its sun was not known to him.

"Ah, then you must have the Galactic Drive!" the Prince exclaimed. They raised polite eyebrows. He said, "A means of traveling infinitely faster than the speed of light."

"Ho, this primitive device!" one of them said merrily. "No wonder you have not even reached your moon yet. Yop, yop, yop!" he chuckled.

The Indian Delegate whispered to his American colleague, "For Heaven's sake, do not let them see a newspaper or they will know at once that we have neither piety, politeness, *nor* civilization!"

BUT the ears of the aliens were sharp. "Newspaper?" one inquired. "By all means, let us see one of your newspapers. It may help us."

The three committee members sat in a moody silence while Smottleb and Cumpaw looked through the morning paper.

"'Teen-ager Slays Six With Pogo Stix'—"

Stuyvesant Lowell Lee sweated, slumped.

"Ah, this shows mettle and fettle, eh, Cumpaw?"

Lee wiped his face on his sleeve, sat up.

"'Caste Riots in Bombay,'" the visitor continued. His tone this time was not pleased.

The Pandit hid his eyes in his hand.

"You see, Smottleb: even here. I tell you it is the fault of the uterine aunts; they neglect their duties to the septs. I warned them at home after the *last* caste riots—" the Pandit dropped his hand, and, for a moment, was tempted to buff his fingernails — "but no, they wouldn't listen. Make the uterine aunts responsible for all property damage and you will see a change. *Pusht*, yes!"

They took up the paper again. "'*Coup in Thailand. Pibbulphum-phit ousts Pibbulpharphel.*'"

Prince P.'s bright face went impassive.

"Ordeal and Combat for some territorial Ulj," the visitor said indifferently, turning to another story. The Prince smiled, though a bit wanly. And suddenly there was a sound like the trilling of birds.

"Smottleb here," said Smottleb, putting his finger in one ear and seeming to listen. A startled look came over his face. "We shall return at once," he said. The two rose, spoke briefly in an alien tongue.

"Bad news?" inquired one of the U.N. Delegates solicitously.

"Our Paramount Ulj is dead."

The Thai said that he shared their darkness.

"And well you may; he was our father," Smottleb said.

The three murmured condolences.

"Will you be back after the funeral?" Ambassador Lee asked.

The twins said they hoped to.

The Prince asked, "Do you practice cremation or burial?"

As neither answered, Pandit Parseebhooe inquired, "Or perhaps you expose your, ah, loved ones?"

Smottleb and Cumpaw looked at each other.

"*Pusht!*" said one.

"*Smersh!*" said the other.

They folded their arms and vanished.

By the time the car arrived in Central Park, there was no trace of the alien ship except a large crowd milling around and craning their necks at an empty sky, and several policemen who repeated over and over again, "Cmahn, cmahn, keep awfadagrass . . ."

The American and Indian Delegates moaned simultaneously, "But what did we say?" Not even the usually cheerful Thai had anything to suggest.

THE New Paramount Ulj greeted the twins on their return. "Sunshine . . . Nice of you to come back and all that."

"It was nothing. We congratulate you," said the brothers.

The Paramount shrugged deprecatingly. "It was a lucky thrust through the spleen."

The brothers clapped their hands admiringly. "We could not



have wished a better death for our father," they said in ritual.

Arm in arm with his successor, they went in for dinner. As they took seats, he said, "Well, and how was this mission? Any luck? Any signs of *ovlirb-tav*?"

"Signs, yes," said Smottleb, "but little more. Do you know, some of them expose their dead?"

There was a general shaking of heads around the high table at this revelation.

"And what is more," Cumpaw confided, "others practice cremation."

The new Paramount said a trifle stiffly, "We can discuss that after dinner, if you don't mind."

But his predecessor's son continued, as if eager to unburden himself, "And the rest of them, if you'll credit me, actually bury their beloved dead!"

There was a stifled shriek and the Dowager Concubine-Uljess was led away by two slave-girls, her napkin pressed tightly to her mouth. Just then, the Gentlemen-in-Waiting arrived with the food. All the guests fell to with good appetite. The late Paramount Ulj had been an old man, but he had always kept himself in good condition and—as everyone assured his proud sons — he was in excellent taste.

— AVRAM DAVIDSON

**for
your
information**



BY WILLY LEY

X-RAYS IN SPACE

ONCE again, this is a column based entirely on questions from the readers. And the readers, this time, have forced me to deviate from a private policy. That policy has been to avoid what might be called topics of the day.

Topics of the day are for the daily newspapers and the weekly news magazines; a monthly magazine simply cannot keep pace.

There are two reasons for making an exception. The topic itself



— space travel — is dear to the heart and mind of every science fiction reader. And I also know from experience that a scientific event will receive big play in the newspapers when it is “news,” but while it is “news,” it is rarely complete. The final outcome, the sober and technical scientific report, will be published months or even years later and the average reader almost never gets to see it.

The news event which prompted quite a number of people to write to me (sending me newspaper clippings, headlines and editorials) and which prompts me to write these lines is the discovery of the so-called “radiation belt” around the Earth. I must caution everybody right now to accept the term “radiation belt” merely as a label. When more about it is known, it might be necessary to invent a different term for it.

The beginning of the story was almost expressed in the title of a book and movie of several decades ago. It could have been called “Explorer I Doesn’t Answer.” Explorer I (or “1958 Alpha”) was neatly in orbit, transmitting data, and stopped transmitting. Then it started up again. Then it stopped.

Somebody in Europe claimed to know that Sputnik II had done the same thing. From what we now know about the natural phenomenon involved, it probably did.

By the time Explorer II went into orbit, scientists already had a suspicion. Vanguard I did not produce the same result, even though it is on a much larger orbit, simply because it is not instrumented. Vanguard’s transmitter merely sings out that it is there.

THE reason why Explorer I stopped reporting from time to time was that its instruments were overloaded with radiation. And this happened from a certain distance on outward, the distance being tentatively given as 600 miles from the ground.

Now when the public hears that above 600 miles there is so much radiation that the instruments cannot handle it any more, it concludes that there must be danger. And when a scientist, Dr. James Van Allen, says that the amount of radiation was such that, in an hour or two, a man would get a radiation dose which is considered the weekly safe limit, the public must conclude that humanity is planet-bound. Dr. Van Allen was the first to say that it isn’t so, but everybody seems to be sufficiently jittery about radiation to disregard the latter portion of the sentence.

In reality, things are never as bad as some people always say. But mostly they are much more complicated than most people think.

To clarify the picture, we have to enumerate quickly what types of radiation we are bound to encounter in space — let's say just above the atmosphere. There are, of course, all kinds of radiation from the Sun, radio waves, heat, visible light and even X-rays. These X-rays coming from the Sun are comparatively weak and are swallowed up by our atmosphere; before the development of high-altitude research rockets, their existence was only suspected but not proved.

Then there are the cosmic rays, which are just fast-moving nuclei of atoms. In most cases, they are protons, the nuclei of hydrogen atoms, simply because there are more hydrogen atoms in interplanetary space than any other kind. Explorer I, incidentally, proved that the number of cosmic rays is smaller than expected.

Well, what about this "radiation belt"?

I am going to say something now that will sound like an unrelated theme to any but a physicist.

In order to make X-rays, you first produce a vacuum which, on the ground, naturally has to be enclosed in a bulb or tube or else it won't stay a vacuum. Through this vacuum, you shoot a stream of electrons. When these electrons hit a target, they produce X-rays. In the actual vacuum tube, the

target is metal for various practical reasons. But you would also get X-rays with, for instance, a graphite target. All that matters is that the electrons have a material target to hit.

Now back to space, where you have a vacuum. There is no doubt that electrons are flying around through space. Now you put a metal satellite there. What you have done is to make the X-ray tube complete—there is now a target!

The point is that space is *not* "full of X-rays" as one headline put it. As long as there is no target, there are no X-rays, except those coming from the Sun directly. It is the satellite that makes the X-rays.

THIS, I have to admit, should have been concluded on theoretical grounds beforehand. It just so happened that everybody was preoccupied with specific problems, such as orbital velocities or the proper frequencies for telemetering transmission and so forth. If anybody said, in advance of the event, that an artificial satellite would act like the target in an X-ray tube, I did not see the statement.

But why does this happen only above 600 miles, or whatever the correct figure may be? The present concept runs like this:

These electrons in space come

from the Sun. Every solar outburst probably throws a shipload of them into space. If the Earth did not have a magnetic field, these electrons — or rather those that happen to hit the Earth — would simply enter the atmosphere and become a part of it, possibly unnoticed. But the Earth's magnetic field keeps them at a distance and they somehow accumulate into what may be called clouds of electrons. Whether they assume a specific shape—say something that would look like the rings of Saturn if it were visible—is not yet known.

Other things still to be found out are the diameter of this area of high electron density, the thickness of this layer and its variations.

The thickness of the layer is likely to vary with geographical latitude. And since the Sun is sometimes more active than at other times, there is likely to be a variation in density. One closely related side issue is the relationship with the aurorae. It sounds probable now that a year of frequent and spectacular aurorae is also a year of maximum density of this electron layer, or area, or stream.

How does this discovery influence space travel plans?

It looks now as if a space station in a circular orbit more or less over the magnetic equator and not more than 500 miles

above sea level would be safely below this electron aggregation. On the other hand, a spaceship boring through it on its way to the Moon or to Mars would pass it so quickly that the X-rays produced during passage could be neglected.

Besides, even if it was too much for the instruments to handle, it is comparatively little if you have a "hot" atom laboratory in mind for comparison. The intensity could be cut to one-tenth of its value by a lead sheet one millimeter thick. A ship could carry this if it were absolutely necessary. Just what will be necessary is something we don't know yet.

The main thing this discovery may do is change the choice for the best orbit for a manned permanent space station.

MAIL ON ATLANTIS

THE article about Atlantis and the theories of Pastor Spanuth in the June issue brought quite a lot of letters. Several people corrected an oversight of mine: there is an English edition of the book. Well, even though it is at my expense, I am happy to announce that an English edition exists, so that any of my readers who feel like it can check all the details.

That the article was read carefully is evidenced by the fact that one part of one sentence brought

me a detailed linguistic discussion from Basil Davenport of the Book-of-the-Month Club. You may remember that I mentioned in passing that Plato's name is (A) a nickname, since his real name was Aristokles, and (B) that the nickname was actually Platón, but that the final "n" has been lost in English, while French and Russian retain it.

Well, the *Magister in Artibus* Basil Davenport had something to say about it which I find interesting. The final "n" has been lost in English because we got this from the Latin. The point is that the Romans had names ending in "o," like Cicero, but one of the grammatical forms derived from such a name would be Ciceronis. Now the Greeks had names like Platón with a corresponding form like Platonos. When the Romans dealt with a Greek name of this type, they always dropped the "n."

In Plato's dialogues, Menon, Kriton and Phaidon thus became Meno, Crito and Phaedo. It was an attempt to assimilate these names, making them sound like Roman names of the type of Cicero, Scipio and Nero. Some people, I am forced to conclude, were "writing down" even then.

Well, this explains why the "n" disappeared in Latin and, consequently and subsequently, in those languages that derived their

learning from the Romans, like English and German. What struck me in Basil Davenport's discussion is that the French, though they write "Platon," did not really retain the "n." They also got their Greek names via Latin, but tacked on an "n" almost everywhere — from the Latin accusative, Mr. Davenport believes. Yes, they do write Platon, which happens to look like the original Greek; but they also write Neron, Ciceron and Junon, adding an "n" where it certainly does not belong.

As for the Russians, they probably really retained the "n" since their early learning was strongly influenced by the Greeks directly — no Russian, to this day, has any trouble learning the Greek alphabet. His own alphabet is only an adaptation of the Greek.

The correspondence about Atlantis ranged far and wide, one letter being concerned mainly with a geographical problem. The correspondent stated his problem quite tersely in one sentence by asking: did I agree with Spanuth's interpretation of Kalypso's sailing instructions?

My answer was "No!" but I had better explain what this is about.

YOU remember that Odysseus, after all kinds of hair-raising adventures, finally gets to a beautiful wooded island, the island of Kalypso. (Mustn't annoy Mr.

Davenport by using the Roman spelling, Calypso; moreover, I like the spelling with a K better myself.) There he sits at the shore for years and years, waiting to return to his home. Finally Kalypso, also prodded by a message which Hermes has brought, permits him to build a raft, telling him how to sail to reach the nearest land.

The instructions are lines 270-279 in the fifth book of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus is to steer by the Pleiades "and the autumn-setting Boötes" until, after seventeen days of sailing, he would see mountainous land.

Following the "autumn-setting Boötes," it was clear to every sailor, meant an easterly course, which also made sense because it had been told that Odysseus had sailed to the west before. It also became clear, the more the study of the Homeric poems progressed, that the poet had almost never made things up. Homer used traditions, legends and actual (though probably oral) reports and instructions, just fitting them into his story line. This, of course, had the result that listeners recognized things and would nod their heads and think, "That's correct." In short, "Kalypso's sailing instructions" were suspected of being somebody's actual sailing instructions. The question was: from where to where?

The goal, the *Odyssey* stated through many lines, was the city of Scheria, inhabited by the Phaiakians. Scheria, many archeologists agreed, was likely to be Tartessos, located at the western shore of the Iberian peninsula. This idea was strengthened by the statements of the inhabitants as woven into the *Odyssey*, namely that they were "the farthest of mortals," and similar references to their isolated location. What remained to be done was to go over the islands within a little over two weeks' sail and see which one would fit the description. The answer was Madeira.

Finally, Doctors Hennig and Erpelt in Germany reset a planetarium for the latitude of Madeira and the year 800 B.C., the most probable time of the writing of the *Odyssey*. The Pleiades and Boötes were seen to rise from very nearly the same point in the east-northeast; Kalypso's sailing instructions fitted a voyage from Madeira to the corner of the Iberian mainland.

Everybody was quite happy, but Pastor Spanuth explains this as a voyage from Madeira to his Atlantis, in the North Sea. He does have a reason, though it is one I consider weak.

All through the portions of the poem where Odysseus is in the company of the Phaiakians, a physical difference is subtly

stressed. Odysseus is instantly recognized as a foreigner. Several times it is said that the Phaiakians look "different," but unfortunately it is never said in what way they looked different. (My personal suspicion is that Homer himself did not know, that he just knew from conversations with sailors that visitors to this far western city were always instantly recognized because they were of a different type.)

Since Odysseus had to be taken as a dark-haired Greek, presumably of the medium-tall lean type, there are really just two choices, since we can't very well expect that Tartessos was a Chinese settlement. The Phaiakians must either have been much darker or much lighter than their Greek visitor. They could conceivably have been dark-skinned settlers from Africa. Or they could have been blond Europeans from the north.

The latter seems more likely. There have been Negro cultures in the past, but they were not in the habit of spreading, whereas the North Europeans seem unable to sit still, even now. Pastor Spanuth also thinks that the Phaiakians of the *Odyssey* are meant to be light-skinned and light-haired Northerners, but instead of just supposing that they established a distant settlement, he tries to bring the hero of the *Odyssey* into their homeland.

Well, as I already said, my answer was "No."

ANTI-MATTER AND ANTI-GRAVITY

EVEN if I did not read the daily papers myself, I could, quite often, deduce what stories have been published from the questions I get in my mail. Recently anti-matter and anti-gravity have been taking up some of the volume.

The questions ranged from the simple question "What is anti-matter?" through the more involved question "Would anti-matter be anti-gravitational?" to a request for instructions for building an anti-gravity device.

Anti-matter, which has been around in the newspapers lately, is what astronomers and science fiction readers have been knowing for years under the name of contra-terrene matter or c-t.

The theoretical existence of contra-terrene matter could be deduced almost at once after the positron had been discovered. Here was a "counter particle"; logically there should be other counter particles. The reasoning was actually quite simple: a hydrogen atom, for example, consists of a positively charged proton as the nucleus with a negatively charged electron going around it. The charges of the two are equal, if opposite, but

their masses are quite different, about 1840 to 1, with the electron at the small end.

Then the positron was found, with a mass like that of the electron, but positively charged. Now if there was a negatively charged proton (variously called "negatron" or "anti-proton"), you could have a hydrogen atom with the charges reversed. That would be contra-terrene matter, and it was also easy to postulate that if normal matter and contra-terrene matter came together, they had to annihilate each other.

But if you had the two kinds of matter safely isolated from each other by a large expanse of empty space, you would not be able, just by looking at them, to tell which kind they were. For example, contra-terrene copper probably would look like copper and conduct an electric current nicely. Contra-terrene iron would most likely be magnetic and subject to rusting when exposed to contra-terrene oxygen.

The news — and it isn't so very new — is that anti-protons have now been produced in the laboratory.

They did not last long in their normal-matter environment, of course, but they lasted long enough to prove that they have real existence.

So this is one part of the problem.

THE next one is whether a piece of normal matter and a piece of contra-terrene matter would attract each other gravitationally. Or to give the question a more modern flavor: could a contra-terrene meteorite take up an orbit around the Earth?

In my opinion: yes. Matter is matter, and just as a piece of contra-terrene iron would display inertia, would have its momentum (when in motion) calculated by the same formula and would be subject to centrifugal force under the proper conditions, it should also be subject to gravitational attraction. We do not know what gravity really is, but it can be taken for granted that the mass of a body is somehow involved. Since contra-terrene matter must have mass, it must be within the law of gravity.

This does not get us a single step closer to the riddle of gravity itself, which we cannot yet solve. The reason we can't solve it right now is probably that we don't have a valid theory about the nature of gravity.

I know that there has been a lot of talk about anti-gravity research. But I also know that most of it is just that: talk. I know of one or two hoaxes. But I don't know of any successes — provided anybody had any success, which I doubt.

The reason I am bringing this

up is that I have found a deep confusion about the issues involved. Just what do the people who hopefully talk about anti-gravity mean when they talk about it? Do they mean a body not subject to gravity — in short, a body which does not have any weight at all and which, if it really existed, would be squeezed out of the atmosphere by the weight of the air around it? Or do they mean a body which is actually repelled?

Now let us make these two cases equal in assuming that the body is such a long distance from the Earth and also from the Sun that any gravitational influence of the normal kind would be negligible. At a distance of one light-year from the Sun, the behavior of a body which just does not weigh anything, and of one which is repelled, would be pretty much the same. Now you want to do something with this body; it is, in fact, a spaceship and you want to go somewhere with it. So the co-pilot adjusts the fuel pumps and the captain pushes the firing button. And the rocket motor begins to work. Against what? Against the *inertia* of the ship.

I can almost hear the anguished screams at this point. Yes, the body not subject to gravity would still have mass, and mass has inertia. Much of the anti-gravity talk is due to the convenient confusion

between weight and mass. So if somebody wants to aim for something really useful, he should not aim for "anti-gravity" but for an inertialess drive. Which is something entirely different.

NOTE TO CORRESPONDENTS

I KNOW from lecture experience that the part of the lecture which the public likes best is the question and answer period, when everybody can get his pet problem off his chest. Well, we can do the same in GALAXY. But just as a lecture hall question and answer period has to be cut off at some point, so that not every question can be answered, we will have to have certain restrictions in GALAXY.

In the first place, I do not — repeat NOT — promise to answer by mail. Fire your question at the editorial office, and if it is judged as being of sufficient public interest, it will be answered in the magazine. As far as feasible, I'll send printed acknowledgments to show that the question has arrived.

In the second place, please don't ask unnecessary questions of the type I've gotten so frequently in the past, such as: "Why is our sun not the biggest star in the Universe?" and "How does an airplane fly?" and believe it or not "Which is heavier, gold or lead?"

The answers to these questions should have been (and maybe were, I don't remember) No. 1: "Because it isn't." No. 2: "Go to your public library." No. 3: "How about looking it up if you don't know?"

ADD: HAZARDS OF ROCKET RESEARCH

IN conclusion, there are two stories I was told, both of which no doubt have a moral, though I am too busy right now to figure it out.

The first story was told to me during an airplane ride by a well-known rocket engineer who works in California. His company maintains a large rocket-motor test area not too far from Los Angeles; in fact, outraged Angelenos have accused them on occasion of shaking the foundations of their buildings.

Well, they had Redstone motors on the test stands. The fuel of the Redstone is no secret; like that of the V-2, it is watered alcohol on one side of the injection system, while liquid oxygen goes in the other side of the injection system. One motor, when on the test stand, showed strange fluctuations. One instant it roared to shake the mountains, the next instant it burned rather feebly. No rocket motor behaves that way because of something wrong in the motor

itself. The blame lies somewhere in the system — and that is just the trouble, for the system is large and complicated. It could be a valve which does not stay open, although this is very unlikely.

At any event, all the valves were checked first. Nothing wrong, which was what everybody had been afraid of. It meant that the flaw was somewhere in the fuel line. Strong men with large pipe wrenches went into action. No, the fuel line was clear. It must be the oxygen line.

It was.

At one knee in the oxygen line, the culprit was discovered. A field mouse, frozen stiff and very dead.

That field mice might be a hazard to rocket testing was new in everybody's book. But what really bothers the men is the question of how that field mouse managed to get into the oxygen line. It is bothersome, because if one mouse can do that, another one might. And they don't like to take the pipes apart to fish dead mice out of the oxygen flow.

THE other story came to me from an Englishman — also during an airplane ride — even though Americans are concerned. The Americans in question are American airmen, stationed somewhere in eastern France. Their planes are rather modern single-seater jet fighters. Naturally the

planes were constantly kept in an operable condition, but they are not flown all the time.

It has to be explained here that such an airplane has several air-intake pipes. One is for cabin air; others are for the purpose of activating various flight instruments.

One morning, a man servicing a plane found one of these air intakes carefully plugged up with what looked to him like dried clay. He reported this to his superior officer. The officer passed it on to his superior, who reported it to Intelligence. Intelligence took the customary dim view of things, especially since only a week earlier another maintenance team had found a few instrument tubes plugged up with dry clay.

Intelligence concluded that this

might be sabotage by French Communists and went to work. Maintenance, in the meantime, went to work too. Intelligence would probably have wanted Maintenance to save the plugged tubes for evidence, but Maintenance was single-minded and considered it their job to keep those planes in fine condition.

Maintenance squirted water into the plugged tubes and then attached a high-pressure air hose and opened the valve wide. A stream of wet mud came out of the plugged holes. The officer in charge looked at it curiously and saw things wiggle and squirm in the mud.

The saboteurs had been caught: mud wasps!

— WILLY LEY



the wizards of Pung's

***How high the toll if this community remains a
stubborn and unprofitable island unto itself?
Send quick to know for whom the ball bounces!***



Corners

By FREDERIK POHL

Illustrated by WOOD

I

THIS is the way it happened in the old days. Pay attention now. I'm not going to repeat myself.

There was this old man. A

wicked one. Coglan was his name, and he came into Pung's Corners in a solid-lead car. He was six feet seven inches tall. He attracted a lot of attention.

Why? Why, because nobody had ever seen a solid-lead car before. Nobody much had ever seen a stranger. It wasn't usual. That was how Pung's Corners was in the old days, a little pocket in the middle of the desert, and nobody came there. There weren't even planes overhead, or not for a long time; but there had been planes just before old man Coglan showed up. It made people nervous.

Old man Coglan had snapping black eyes and a loose and limber step. He got out of his car and slammed the door closed. It didn't go *tchik* like a Volkswagen or *per-clack* like a Buick. It went *woomp*. It was heavy, since, as I mentioned, it was solid lead.

"Boy!" he bellowed, standing in front of Pung's Inn. "Come get my bags!"

Charley Frink was the bellboy at that time — yes, the Senator. Of course, he was only fifteen years old then. He came out for Coglan's bags and he had to make four trips. There was a lot of space in the back of that car, with its truck tires and double-thick glass, and all of it was full of baggage.

While Charley was hustling the bags in, Coglan was parading back and forth on Front Street. He

winked at Mrs. Churchwood and ogled young Kathy Flint. He nodded to the boys in front of the barber shop. He was a character, making himself at home like that.

In front of Andy Grammis's grocery store, Andy tipped his chair back. Considerately, he moved his feet so his yellow dog could get out the door. "He seems like a nice feller," he said to Jack Tighe. (Yes, *that* Jack Tighe.)

Jack Tighe stood in the shelter of the door and he was frowning. He knew more than any of the rest of them, though it wasn't time to say anything yet. But he said: "We don't get any strangers."

Andy shrugged. He leaned back in his chair. It was warm in the sun.

"Pshaw, Jack," he said. "Maybe we ought to get a few more. Town's going to sleep." He yawned drowsily.

And Jack Tighe left him there, left him and started down the street for home, because he knew what he knew.

ANYWAY, Coglan didn't hear them. If he had heard, he wouldn't have cared. It was old man Coglan's great talent that he didn't care what people had to say about him, and the others like him. He couldn't have been what he was if that hadn't been so.

So he checked in at Pung's Inn. "A suite, boy!" he boomed. "The

best. A place where I can be comfortable, *real* comfortable."

"Yes, sir, Mister—"

"Coglan, boy! Edsel T. Coglan. A proud name at both ends, and I'm proud to wear it!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Coglan. Right away. Now let's see." He pored over his room ledgers, although, except for the Willmans and Mr. Carpenter when his wife got mad at him, there weren't any guests, as he certainly knew. He pursed his lips. He said: "Ah, good! The bridal suite's vacant, Mr. Coglan. I'm sure you'll be very comfortable there. Of course, it's eighty-five a day."

"The bridal suite it is, boy!" Coglan chucked the pen into its holder with a fencer's thrust. He grinned like a fine old Bengal tiger with white crewcut hair.

And there was something to grin about, in a way, wasn't there? The bridal suite. That was funny.

Hardly anybody ever took the bridal suite at Pung's Inn, unless they had a bride. You only had to look at Coglan to know that he was a long way from taking a bride — a long way, and in the wrong direction. Tall as he was, snapping-eyed and straight-backed as he was, he was clearly on the far side of marrying. He was at least eighty. You could see it in his crepy skin and his gnarled hands.

The room clerk whistled for

Charley Frink. "Glad to have you with us, Mr. Coglan," he said. "Charley'll have your bags up in a jiffy. Will you be staying with us long?"

Coglan laughed out loud. It was the laugh of a relaxed and confident man. "Yes," he said. "Quite long."

Now what did Coglan do when he was all alone in the bridal suite?

Well, first he paid off the bell-boy with a ten-dollar bill. That surprised Charley Frink, all right. He wasn't used to that kind of tipping. He went out and Coglan closed the door behind him in a very great good humor.

Coglan was happy.

SO he peered around, grinning a wolf's grin. He looked at the bathroom, with its stall shower and bright white porcelain. "Quaint," he murmured. He amused himself with the electric lights, switching them on and off. "Delicious," he said. "So *manual*." In the living room of the suite, the main light was from an overhead six-point chandelier, best Grand Rapids glass. Two of the pendants were missing. "Ridiculous," chuckled old Mr. Coglan, "but very, very sweet."

Of course, you know what he was thinking. He was thinking of the big caverns and the big machines. He was thinking of the design wobblators and the bomb-

shielded power sources, the self-contained raw material lodes and the unitized distribution pipelines. But I'm getting ahead of the story. It isn't time to talk about those things yet. So don't ask.

Anyway, after old man Coglan had a good look around, he opened one of his bags.

He sat down in front of the desk.

He took a Kleenex out of his pocket and with a fastidious expression picked up the blotter with it, and dumped it on the floor.

He lifted the bag onto the bare desk top and propped it, open, against the wall.

You never saw a bag like that! It looked like a kind of electronic tool kit, I swear. Its back was a panel of pastel lucite with sparks embedded in it. It glittered. There was a cathode screen. There was a scanner, a microphone, a speaker. All those things and lots more. How do I know this? Why, it's all written down in a book called *My Eighteen Years at Pung's Hall*, by Senator C. T. Frink. Because Charley was in the room next door and there was a keyhole.

So then what happened was that a little tinkly chime sounded distantly within the speaker, and the cathode screen flickered and lit up.

"Coglan," boomed the tall old man. "Reporting in. Let me speak to V. P. Maffity."

NOW you have to know what Pung's Corners was like in those days.

Everybody knows what it is now, but then it was small. Very small. It sat on the bank of the Delaware River like a fat old lady on the edge of a spindly chair.

General "Retreating Johnnie" Estabrook wintered there before the Battle of Monmouth and wrote pettishly to General Washington: "I can obtain no Provision here, as the inhabitants are so averse to our Cause, that I cannot get a Man to come near me."

During the Civil War, a small draft riot took place in its main square, in which a recruiting colonel of the IXth Volunteer Pennsylvania Zouaves was chased out of town and the son of the town's leading banker suffered superficial scalp wounds. (He fell off his horse. He was drunk.)

These were only little wars, you know. They had left only little scars.

Pung's Corners missed all the big ones.

For instance, when the biggest of all got going, why, Pung's Corners had a ticket on the fifty-yard line but never had to carry the ball.

The cobalt bomb that annihilated New Jersey stopped short at the bank of the Delaware,

checked by a persistent easterly wind.

The radio-dust that demolished Philadelphia went forty-some miles up the river. Then the drone that was spreading it was rammed down by a suicide pilot in a shaky jet. (Pung's Corners was one mile farther on.)

The H-bombs that scattered around the New York megalopolis bracketed Pung's Corners, but it lay unscathed between.

You see how it was? They never laid a glove on us. But after the war, we were marooned.

Now that wasn't a bad way to be, you know? Read some of the old books, you'll see. The way Pung's Corners felt, there was a lot to be said for being marooned. People in Pung's Corners were genuinely sorry about the war, with so many people getting killed and all. (Although we won it. It was worse for the other side.) But every cloud has its silver lining and so on, and being surrounded at every point of the compass by badlands that no one could cross had a few compensating features.

There was a Nike battalion in Pung's Corners, and they say they shot down the first couple of helicopters that tried to land because they thought they were the enemy. Maybe they did. But along about the fifth copter, they didn't think that any more, I guarantee. And then the planes stopped coming.

Outside, they had plenty to think about, I suppose. They stopped bothering with Pung's Corners.

Until Mr. Coglan came in.

AFTER Coglan got his line of communication opened up — because that was what the big suitcase was, a TV communications set — he talked for a little while. Charley had a red dent on his forehead for two days, he pressed against the doorknob so hard, trying to see.

"Mr. Maffity?" boomed Coglan, and a pretty girl's face lighted up on the screen.

"This is Vice President Maffity's secretary," she said sweetly. "I see you arrived safely. One moment, please, for Mr. Maffity."

And then the set flickered and another face showed up, the blood brother to Coglan's own. It was the face of an elderly and successful man who recognized no obstacles, the face of a man who knew what he wanted and got it. "Coglan, boy! Good to see you got there!"

"No sweat, L.S.," said Coglan. "I'm just about to secure my logistics. Money. This is going to take money."

"No trouble?"

"No trouble, Chief. I can promise you that. There isn't *going* to be any trouble." He grinned and picked up a nested set of little metallic boxes out of a pouch in the suitcase. He opened one, shook

out a small disk-shaped object, silver and scarlet plastic. "I'm using this right away."

"And the reservoir?"

"I haven't checked yet, Chief. But the pilots said they dumped the stuff in. No opposition from the ground either, did you notice that? These people used to shoot down every plane that came near. They're softening. They're ripe."

"Good enough," said L. S. Maf-fity from the little cathode screen. "Make it so, Coglan. Make it so."

NOW, at the Shawanganunk National Bank, Mr. LaFarge saw Coglan come in and knew right away something was up.

How do I know that? Why, that's in a book too. *The Federal Budget and How I Balanced It: A Study in Surplus Dynamics*, by Treasury Secretary (Retired) Wilbur Otis LaFarge. Most everything is in a book, if you know where to look for it. That's something you young people have got to learn.

Anyway, Mr. LaFarge, who was then only an Assistant Vice President, greeted old man Coglan effusively. It was his way. "Morning, sir!" he said. "Morning! In what way can we serve you here at the bank?"

"We'll find a way," promised Mr. Coglan.

"Of course, sir. Of course!" Mr. LaFarge rubbed his hands. "You'll

want a checking account. Certainly! And a savings account? And a safety deposit box? Absolutely! Christmas Club, I suppose. Perhaps a short-term auto loan, or a chattel loan on your household effects for the purpose of consolidating debts and reducing—"

"Don't have any debts," said Coglan. "Look, what's-your-name—"

"LaFarge, sir! Wilbur LaFarge. Call me Will."

"Look, Willie. Here are my credit references." And he spilled a manila envelope out on the desk in front of LaFarge.

The banker looked at the papers and frowned. He picked one up. "Letter of credit," he said. "Some time since I saw one of those. From Danbury, Connecticut, eh?" He shook his head and pouted. "All from outside, sir."

"I'm from outside."

"I see." LaFarge sighed heavily after a second. "Well, sir, I don't know. What is it you wanted?"

"What I want is a quarter of a million dollars, Willie. In cash. And make it snappy, will you?"

Mr. LaFarge blinked.

You don't know him, of course. He was before your time. You don't know what a request like that would do to him.

When I say he blinked, I mean, man, he *blinked*. Then he blinked again and it seemed to calm him. For a moment, the veins had begun to stand out in his temples; for

a moment, his mouth was open to speak. But he closed his mouth and the veins receded.

BECAUSE, you see, old man Coglan took that silvery, scarlet thing out of his pocket. It glittered. He gave it a twist and he gave it a certain kind of squeeze, and it hummed, a deep and throbbing note. But it didn't satisfy Mr. Coglan.

"Wait a minute," he said, off-handedly, and he adjusted it and squeezed it again. "That's better," he said.

The note was deeper, but still not quite deep enough to suit Coglan. He twisted the top a fraction more, until the pulsing note was too deep to be heard, and then he nodded.

There was silence for a second.

Then: "Large bills?" cried Mr. LaFarge. "Or small?" He leaped up and waved to a cashier. "Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars! You there, Tom Fairleigh! Hurry it up now. What? No, I don't care where you get it. Go out to the vault, if there isn't enough in the cages. But bring me two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

He sank down at his desk again, panting. "I am really sorry, sir," he apologized to Mr. Coglan. "The clerks you get these days! I almost wish that old times would come back."

"Perhaps they will, friend," said Coglan, grinning widely to himself. "Now," he said, not unkindly, "shut up."

He waited, tapping the desk top, humming to himself, staring at the blank wall. He completely ignored Mr. LaFarge until Tom Fairleigh and another teller brought four canvas sacks of bills. They began to dump them on the desk to count them.

"No, don't bother," said Coglan cheerfully, his black eyes snapping with good humor. "I trust you." He picked up the sacks, nodded courteously to Mr. LaFarge, and walked out.

Ten seconds later, Mr. LaFarge suddenly shook his head, rubbed his eyes and stared at the two tellers. "What—"

"You just gave him a quarter of a million dollars," said Tom Fairleigh. "You made me get it out of the vault."

"I *did*?"

"You did."

They looked at each other.

Mr. LaFarge said at last: "It's been a long time since we had any of *that* in Pung's Corners."

III

NOW I have to tell a part that isn't so nice. It's about a girl named Marlene Groshaw. I positively will not explain any part of it. I probably shouldn't mention it

at all, but it's part of the history of our country. Still—

Well, this is what happened. Yes, it's in a book too— *On Call*, by One Who Knows. (And we know who "One Who Knows" is, don't we?)

She wasn't a bad girl. Not a bit of it. Or, anyway, she didn't mean to be. She was too pretty for her own good and not very smart. What she wanted out of life was to be a television star.

Well, that was out of the question, of course. We didn't use live television at all in Pung's Corners those days, only a few old tapes. They left the commercials in, although the goods the old, dead announcers were trying to sell were not on the market anywhere, much less in Pung's Corners. And Marlene's idol was a TV saleslady named Betty Furness. Marlene had pictures of her, dubbed off the tapes, pasted all over the walls of her room.

At the time I'm talking about, Marlene called herself a public stenographer. There wasn't too much demand for her services. (And later on, after things opened up, she gave up that part of her business entirely.) But if anybody needed a little extra help in Pung's Corners, like writing some letters or getting caught up on the back filing and such, they'd call on Marlene. She'd never worked for a stranger before.

She was rather pleased when the desk clerk told her that there was this new Mr. Cogan in town, and that he needed an assistant to help him run some new project he was up to. She didn't know what the project was, but I have to tell you that if she knew, she would have helped anyhow. Any budding TV star would, of course.

She stopped in the lobby of Pung's Inn to adjust her makeup. Charley Frink looked at her with that kind of a look, in spite of being only fifteen. She sniffed at him, tossed her head and proudly went upstairs.

She tapped on the carved oak door of Suite 41 — that was the bridal suite; she knew it well — and smiled prettily for the tall old man with snapping eyes who swung it open.

"Mr. Cogan? I'm Miss Groshawk, the public stenographer. I understand you sent for me."

The old man looked at her piercingly for a moment.

"Yes," he said, "I did. Come in."

He turned his back on her and let her come in and close the door by herself.

Cogan was busy. He had the suite's television set in pieces all over the floor.

He was trying to fix it some way or another, Marlene judged. And that was odd, mused Marlene in her cloudy young way, because even if she wasn't really *brainy*,

she knew that he was no television repairman, or anything like that. She knew exactly what he was. It said so on his card, and Mr. LaFarge had shown the card around town. He was a research and development counselor.

Whatever *that* was.

MARLENE was conscientious, and she knew that a good public stenographer took her temporary employer's work to heart. She said: "Something wrong, Mr. Cogan?"

He looked up, irritable. "I can't get Danbury on this thing."

"Danbury, Connecticut? Outside? No, sir. It isn't supposed to get Danbury."

He straightened up and looked at her. "It isn't supposed to get Danbury." He nodded thoughtfully. "This forty-eight-inch twenty-seven tube full-color suppressed sideband UHF-VHF General Electric wall model with static suppressors and self-compensating tuning strips, it isn't supposed to get Danbury, Connecticut."

"That's right, sir."

"Well," he said, "that's going to be a big laugh on the cavern in Schenectady."

Marlene said helpfully: "It hasn't got any antenna."

Cogan frowned and corrected her. "No, that's impossible. It's got to have an antenna. These leads go somewhere."

Marlene shrugged attractively.

He said: "Right after the war, of course, you couldn't get Danbury at all. I agree. Not with all those fission products, eh? But that's down to a negligible count now. Danbury should come in loud and clear."

Marlene said: "No, it was after that. I used to, uh, date a fellow named Timmy Horan, and he was in that line of business, making television repairs, I mean. A couple years after the war, I was just a kid, they began to get pictures once in a while. Well, they passed a law, Mr. Cogan."

"A law?" His face looked suddenly harsh.

"Well, I think they did. Anyway, Timmy had to go around taking the antennas off all the sets. He really did. Then they hooked them up with TV tape recorders, like." She thought hard for a second. "He didn't tell me why," she volunteered.

"I know why," he said flatly.

"So it only plays records, Mr. Cogan. But if there's anything you want, the desk clerk'll get it for you. He's got lots. Dinah Shores and Jackie Gleasons and *Medic*. Oh, and Westerns. You tell him what you want."

"I see." Cogan stood there for a second, thinking. Not to her but to himself, he said: "No wonder we weren't getting through. Well, we'll see about that."

"What, Mr. Cogan?"

"Never mind, Miss Groshawk. I see the picture now. And it isn't a very pretty one."

He went back to the television set.

He wasn't a TV mechanic, no, but he knew a little something about what he was doing for sure, because he had it all back together in a minute. Oh, less than that. And not just the way it was. He had it improved. Even Marlene could see that. Maybe not *improved*, but different; he'd done something to it.

"Better?" he demanded, looking at her.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean does looking at the picture do anything to you?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cogan, but I honestly don't care for *Studio One*. It makes me think too hard, you know?"

But she obediently watched the set.

HE had tuned in on the recorded wire signal that went out to all of Pung's Corners TV sets. I don't suppose you know how we did it then, but there was a central station where they ran off a show all the time, for people who didn't want to bother with tapes. It was all old stuff, of course. And everybody had seen all of them already.

But Marlene watched, and fun-

nily, in a moment she began to giggle.

"Why, Mr. Cogan," she said, though he hadn't done anything at all.

"Better," he said, and he was satisfied.

He had every reason to be.

"However," said Mr. Cogan, "first things come first. I need your help."

"All right, Mr. Cogan," Marlene said in a silky voice.

"I mean in a business way. I want to hire some people. I want you to help me locate them, and to keep the records straight. Then I shall need to buy certain materials. And I'll need an office, perhaps a few buildings for light industrial purposes, and so on."

"That will take a lot of money, won't it?"

Cogan chuckled.

"Well, then," said Marlene, satisfied, "I'm your girl, Mr. Cogan. I mean in a business way. Would you mind telling me what the business is?"

"I intend to put Pung's Corners back on its feet."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Cogan. But how, I mean?"

"Advertising," said old man Cogan, with a devil's smile and a demon's voice.

Silence. There was a moment of silence.

Marlene said faintly: "I don't think they're going to like it."

"Who?"

"The bigwigs. They aren't going to like that. Not advertising, you know. I mean I'm for *you*. I'm in favor of advertising. I *like* it. But—"

"There's no question of liking it!" Coglan said in a terrible voice. "It's what has made our country great! It tooled us up to fight in a great war, and when that war was over, it put us back together again!"

"I UNDERSTAND that, Mr. Coglan," she said. "But—"

"I don't want to hear that word from you, Miss Groshawk," he snapped. "There is no question. Consider America after the war, ah? You don't remember, perhaps. They kept it from you. But the cities all were demolished. The buildings were ruins. It was only advertising that built them up again—advertising, and the power of research! For I remind you of what a great man once said: 'Our chief job in research is to keep the customer reasonably dissatisfied with what he has.'"

Coglan paused, visibly affected. "That was Charles F. Kettering of General Motors," he said, "and the beauty of it, Miss Groshawk, is that he said this in the Twenties! Imagine! So clear a perception of what Science means to all of us. So comprehensive a grasp of the meaning of American Inventiveness!"

Marlene said brokenly: "That's beautiful."

Coglan nodded. "Of course. So, you see, there is nothing at all that your bigwigs can do, like it or not. We Americans—we *real* Americans — know that without advertising there is no industry; and accordingly we have shaped advertising into a tool that serves us well. Why, here, look at that television set!"

Marlene did, and in a moment began again to giggle. Archly she whispered: "Mr. Coglan!"

"You see? And if that doesn't suffice, well, there's always the law. Let's see what the bigwigs of Pung's Corners can do against the massed might of the United States Army!"

"I do hope there won't be any fighting, Mr. Coglan."

"I doubt there will," he said sincerely. "And now to work, eh? Or—" he glanced at his watch and nodded—"after all, there's no real hurry this afternoon. Suppose we order some dinner, just for the two of us. And some wine? And—"

"Of course, Mr. Coglan."

Marlene started to go to the telephone, but Mr. Coglan stopped her.

"On second thought, Miss Groshawk," he said, beginning to breathe a little hard, "I'll do the ordering. You just sit there and rest for a minute. Watch the television set, eh?"

NOW I have to tell you about Jack Tighe.

Yes, indeed. Jack Tighe. The Father of the Second Republic. Sit tight and listen and don't interrupt, because what I have to tell you isn't exactly what you learned in school.

The apple tree? No, that's only a story. It couldn't have happened, you see, because apple trees don't grow on upper Madison Avenue, and that's where Jack Tighe spent his youth. Because Jack Tighe wasn't the President of the Second Republic. For a long time, he was something else, something called V.P. in charge of S.L. division, of the advertising firm of Yust and Ruminant.

That's right. Advertising.

Don't cry. It's all right. He'd given it up, you see, long before—oh, *long* before, even before the big war; given it up and come to Pung's Corners, to retire.

Jack Tighe had his place out on the marshland down at the bend of the Delaware River. It wasn't particularly healthy there. All the highlands around Pung's Corners drained into the creeks of that part of the area, and a lot of radioactivity had come down. But it didn't bother Jack Tighe, because he was too old.

He was as old as old man Cogan, in fact. And what's more, they

had known each other, back at the agency.

Jack Tighe was also big, not as big as Cogan but well over six feet. And in a way he looked like Cogan. You've seen his pictures. Same eyes, same devil-may-care bounce to his walk and snap to his voice. He could have been a big man in Pung's Corners. They would have made him mayor any time. But he said he'd come there to retire, and retire he would; it would take a major upheaval to make him come out of retirement, he said.

And he got one.

THE first thing was Andy Grammis, white as a sheet.

"Jack!" he whispered, out of breath at the porch steps, for he'd run almost all the way from his store.

Jack Tighe took his feet down off the porch rail. "Sit down, Andy," he said kindly. "I suppose I know why you're here."

"You do, Jack?"

"I think so." Jack Tighe nodded. Oh, he was a handsome man. He said: "Aircraft dumping neoscopolamine in the reservoir, a stranger turning up in a car with a sheet-lead body. And we all know what's outside, don't we? Yes, it has to be that."

"It's him, all right," babbled Andy Grammis, plopping himself down on the steps, his face chalk.

"It's him and there's nothing we can do! He came into the store this morning. Brought Marlene with him. We should have done something about that girl, Jack. I knew she'd come to no good—"

"What did he want?"

"Want? Jack, he had a pad and a pencil like he wanted to take down *orders*, and he kept asking for — asking for — 'Breakfast foods,' he says, 'what've you got in the way of breakfast foods?' So I told him. Oatmeal and corn flakes. Jack, he *flew* at me! 'You don't stock Coco-Wheet?' he says. 'Or Treets, Eets, Neets or Elixo-Wheets? How about Hunny-Yummies, or Prune-Bran Whippets, The Cereal with the Zip-Gun in Every Box?' 'No, sir,' I tell him.

"But he's mad by then. 'Potatoes?' he hollers. 'What about potatoes?' Well, we've got plenty of potatoes, a whole cellar full. But I tell him and *that* doesn't satisfy him. 'Raw, you mean?' he yells. 'Not Tater-Fluff, Pre-Skortch Mickies or Uncle Everett's Converted Spuds?' And then he shows me his card."

"I know," said Jack Tighe kindly, for Grammis seemed to find it hard to go on. "You don't have to say it, if you don't want to."

"Oh, I can say it all right, Jack," said Andy Grammis bravely. "This Mr. Cogan, he's an adver—"

"No," said Jack Tighe, standing up, "don't make yourself do it.

It's bad enough as it is. But it had to come. Yes, count it that it had to come, Andy. We've had a few good years, but we couldn't expect them to last forever."

"But what are we going to *do*?"

"Get up, Andy," said Jack Tighe strongly. "Come inside! Sit down and rest yourself. And I'll send for the others."

"You're going to fight him? But he has the whole United States Army behind him."

Old Jack Tighe nodded. "So he has, Andy," he said, but he seemed wonderfully cheerful.

JACK Tighe's place was a sort of ranch house, with fixings. He was a great individual man, Jack Tighe was. All of you know that, because you were taught it in school; and maybe some of you have been to the house. But it's different now; I don't care what they say. The furniture isn't just the same. And the grounds —

Well, during the big war, of course, that was where the radio-dust drained down from the hills, so nothing grew. They've prettied it up with grass and trees and flowers. Flowers! I'll tell you what's wrong with that. In his young days, Jack Tighe was an account executive on the National Floral account. Why, he wouldn't have a flower in the house, much less plant and tend them.

But it was a nice house, all the

same. He fixed Andy Grammis a drink and sat him down. He phoned downtown and invited half a dozen people to come in to see them. He didn't say what it was about, naturally. No sense in starting a panic.

But everyone pretty much knew. The first to arrive was Timmy Horan, the fellow from the television service, and he'd given Charley Frink a ride on the back of his bike. He said, breathless: "Mr. Tighe, they're on our lines. I don't know how he's done it, but Cogan is transmitting on our wire TV circuit. And the stuff he's transmitting, Mr. Tighe!"

"Sure," said Tighe soothingly. "Don't worry about it, Timothy. I imagine I know what sort of stuff it is, eh?"

He got up, humming pleasantly, and snapped on the television set. "Time for the afternoon movie, isn't it? I suppose you left the tapes running."

"Of course, but he's interfering with it!"

Tighe nodded. "Let's see."

The picture on the TV screen quavered, twisted into slanting lines of pale dark and snapped into shape.

"I remember that one!" Charley Frink exclaimed. "It's one of my favorites, Timmy!"

On the screen, Number Two Son, a gun in his hand, was backing away from a hooded killer.

Number Two Son tripped over a loose board and fell into a vat. He came up grotesquely comic, covered with plaster and mud.

Tighe stepped back a few paces. He spread the fingers of one hand and moved them rapidly up and down before his eyes.

"Ah," he said, "yes. See for yourself, gentlemen."

Andy Grammis hesitatingly copied the older man. He spread his fingers and, clumsily at first, moved them before his eyes, as though shielding his vision from the cathode tube. Up and down he moved his hand, making a sort of stroboscope that stopped the invisible flicker of the racing electronic pencil.

And, yes, there it was!

SEEN without the stroboscope, the screen showed bland-faced Charlie Chan in his white Panama hat. But the stroboscope showed something else. Between the consecutive images of the old movie there was another image — flashed for only a tiny fraction of a second, too quick for the conscious brain to comprehend, but, oh, how it struck into the subconscious!

Andy blushed.

"That — that girl," he stammered, shocked. "She hasn't got any—"

"Of course she hasn't," said Tighe pleasantly. "Subliminal com-



pulsion, eh? The basic sex drive; you don't know you're seeing it, but the submerged mind doesn't miss it. No. And notice the box of Prune-Bran Whippets in her hand."

Charley Frink coughed. "Now that you mention it, Mr. Tighe," he said, "I notice that I've just been thinking how tasty a dish of Prune-Bran Whippets would be right now."

"Naturally," agreed Jack Tighe. Then he frowned. "Naked women, yes. But the female audience should be appealed to also. I wonder." He was silent for a couple of minutes, and held the others silent with him, while tirelessly he moved the spread hand before his eyes.

Then he blushed.

"Well," he said amiably, "that's for the female audience. It's all there. Subliminal advertising. A product, and a key to the basic drives, and all flashed so quickly that the brain can't organize its defenses. So when you think of Prune-Bran Whippets, you think of sex. Or more important, when you think of sex, you think of Prune-Bran Whippets."

"Gee, Mr. Tighe. I think about sex a lot."

"Everybody does," said Jack Tighe comfortingly, and he nodded.

THERE was a gallumphing sound from outside then and Wilbur LaFarge from the Shawan-

ganunk National came trotting in. He was all out of breath and scared.

"He's done it again, he's done it again, Mr. Tighe, sir! That Mr. Cogan, he came and demanded more money! Said he's going to build a *real* TV network slave station here in Pung's Corners. Said he's opening up a branch agency for Yust and Ruminant, whoever they are. Said he was about to put Pung's Corners back on the map and needed money to do it."

"And you gave it to him?"

"I couldn't *help* it."

Jack Tighe nodded wisely. "No, you couldn't. Even in my day, you couldn't much help it, not when the agency had you in its sights and the finger squeezing down on the trigger. Neo-scop in the drinking water, to make every living soul in Pung's Corners a little more suggestible, a little less stiff-backed. Even me, I suppose, though perhaps I don't drink as much water as most. And subliminal advertising on the wired TV, and subsonic compulsives when it comes to man-to-man talk. Tell me, LaFarge, did you happen to hear a faint droning sound? I thought so; yes. They don't miss a trick. Well," he said, looking somehow pleased, "there's no help for it. We'll have to fight."

"Fight?" whispered Wilbur LaFarge, for he was no brave man, no, not even though he later

became the Secretary of the Treasury.

"Fight!" boomed Jack Tighe.

Everybody looked at everybody else.

"There are hundreds of us," said Jack Tighe, "and there's only one of him. Yes, we'll fight! We'll distill the drinking water. We'll rip Cogan's little transmitter out of our TV circuit. Timmy can work up electronic sniffers to see what else he's using; we'll find all his gadgets, and we'll destroy them. The subsonics? Why, he has to carry that gear with him. We'll just take it away from him. It's either that or we give up our heritage as free men!"

Wilbur LaFarge cleared his throat. "And then—"

"Well you may say 'and then,'" agreed Jack Tighe. "And then the United States Cavalry comes charging over the hill to rescue him. Yes. But you must have realized by now, gentlemen, that this means war."

And so they had, though you couldn't have said that any of them seemed very happy about it.

V

NOW I have to tell you what it was like outside in those days.

The face of the Moon is no more remote. Oh, you can't imagine it, you really can't. I don't know if I can explain it to you,

either, but it's all in a book and you can read it if you want to . . . a book that was written by somebody important, a major, who later on became a general (but that was *much* later and in another army) and whose name was T. Wallace Commaigne.

The book? Why, that was called *The End of the Beginning*, and it is Volume One of his twelve-volume set of memoirs entitled: *I Served with Tighe: The Struggle to Win the World*.

War had been coming, war that threatened more, until it threatened everything, as the horrors in its supersonic pouches grew beyond even the dreads of hysteria. But there was time to guesstimate, as *Time Magazine* used to call it.

The dispersal plan came first. Break up cities, spread them apart, diffuse population and industry to provide the smallest possible target for even the largest possible bomb.

But dispersal increased another vulnerability—more freight trains, more cargo ships, more boxcar planes carrying raw materials to and finished products from an infinity of production points. Harder, yes, to hit and destroy, easier to choke off coming and going.

Then dig in, the planners said. Not dispersal but bomb shelter. But more than bomb shelter — make the factories mine for their ores, drill for their fuels, pump for their coolants and steams — and

make them independent of supplies that may never be delivered, of workers who could not live belowground for however long the unpredictable war may last, seconds or forever — even of brains that might not reach the drawing boards and research labs and directors' boards, brains that might either be dead or concussed into something other than brains.

So the sub-surface factories even designed for themselves, always on a rising curve:

Against an enemy presupposed to grow smarter and slicker and quicker with each advance, just as we and our machines do. Against our having fewer and fewer fighting men; pure logic that, as war continues, more and more are killed, fewer and fewer left to operate the killer engines. Against the destruction or capture of even the impregnable underground factories, guarded as no dragon of legend ever was — by all that Man could devise at first in the way of traps and cages, blast and ray — and then by the slip-leashed invention of machines ordered always to speed up — more and more, deadlier and deadlier.

And the next stage — the fortress factories hooked to each other, so that the unthinkably defended plants, should they inconceivably fall, would in the dying message pass their responsibilities to the next of kin — survivor factories to

split up their work, increase output, step up the lethal pace of invention and perfection, still more murderous weapons to be operated by still fewer defenders.

And another, final plan — gear the machines to feed and house and clothe and transport a nation, a hemisphere, a world recovering from no one could know in advance what bombs and germs and poisons and — name it and it probably would happen if the war lasted long enough.

With a built-in signal of peace, of course: the air itself. Pure once more, the atmosphere, routinely tested moment by moment, would switch production from war to peace.

And so it did.

But who could have known beforehand that the machines might not *know* war from peace?

HERE'S Detroit: a hundred thousand rat-inhabited manless acres, blind windows and shattered walls. From the air, it is dead. But underneath it — ah, the rapid pulse of life! The hammering systole and diastole of raw-material conduits sucking in fuel and ore, pumping out finished autos. Spidery passages stretched out to the taconite beds under the Lakes. Fleets of barges issued from concrete pens to match the U-boat nests at Lorient and, unmanned, swam the Lakes and the canals to their dis-

tribution points, bearing shiny new Buicks and Plymouths.

What made them new?

Why, industrial design! For the model years changed. The Dynaflow '61 gave place to the Super-Dynaflow Mark Eight of 1962; twin-beam headlights became triple; white-wall tires turned to pastel and back to solid ebony black.

It was a matter of design efficiency.

What the Founding Fathers learned about production was essentially this: It don't much matter what you build, it only matters that people should want to buy it. What they learned was: Never mind the judgmatical faculties of the human race. They are a frail breed. They move no merchandise. They boost no sales. Rely, instead, on the monkey trait of curiosity.

And curiosity, of course, feeds on secrecy.

So generations of automotivators created new cosmetic gimmicks for their cars in secret laboratories staffed by sworn mutes. No atomic device was half so classified! And all Detroit echoed their security measures; fleets of canvas-swathed mysteries swarmed the highways at new-model time each year; people talked. Oh, yes — they laughed; it was comic; but though they were amused, they were piqued; it was good to make

a joke of the mystery, but the capper to the joke was to own one of the new models oneself.

The appliance manufacturers pricked up their ears. Ah, so. Curiosity, eh? So they leased concealed space to design new ice-tray compartments and brought them out with a flourish of trumpets. Their refrigerators sold like mad. Yes, like mad.

RCA brooded over the lesson and added a fillip of their own; there was the vinylite record, unbreakable, colorful, new. They designed it under wraps and then, the crowning touch, they leaked the secret; it was the trick that Manhattan Project hadn't learned — a secret that concealed the real secret. For all the vinylite program was only a facade; it was security in its highest manifestation; the vinylite program was a mere cover for the submerged LP.

It moved goods. But there was a limit. The human race is a blabbermouth.

Very well, said some great unknown, eliminate the human race! Let a *machine* design the new models! Add a design unit. Set it, by means of wobblators and random-choice circuits, to make its changes in an unforeseeable way. Automate the factories; conceal them underground; program the machine to program itself. After all, why not? As Coglan had quoted Charles F. Kettering, "Our chief

job in research is to keep the customer reasonably dissatisfied with what he has," and proper machines can do *that* as well as any man. Better, if you really want to know.

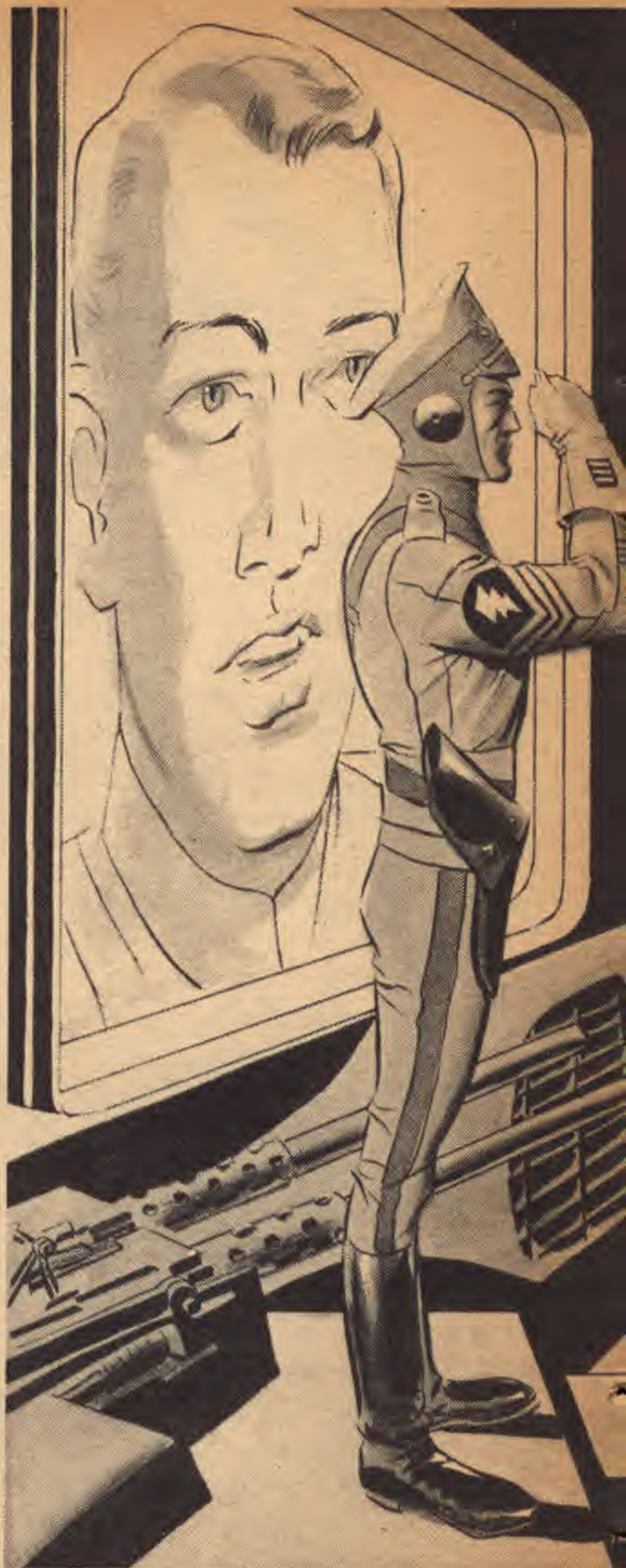
And so the world was full of drusy caverns from which wonders constantly poured. The war had given industry its start by starting the dispersal pattern; bomb shelter had embedded the factories in rock; now industrial security made the factories independent. Goods flowed out in a variegated torrent.

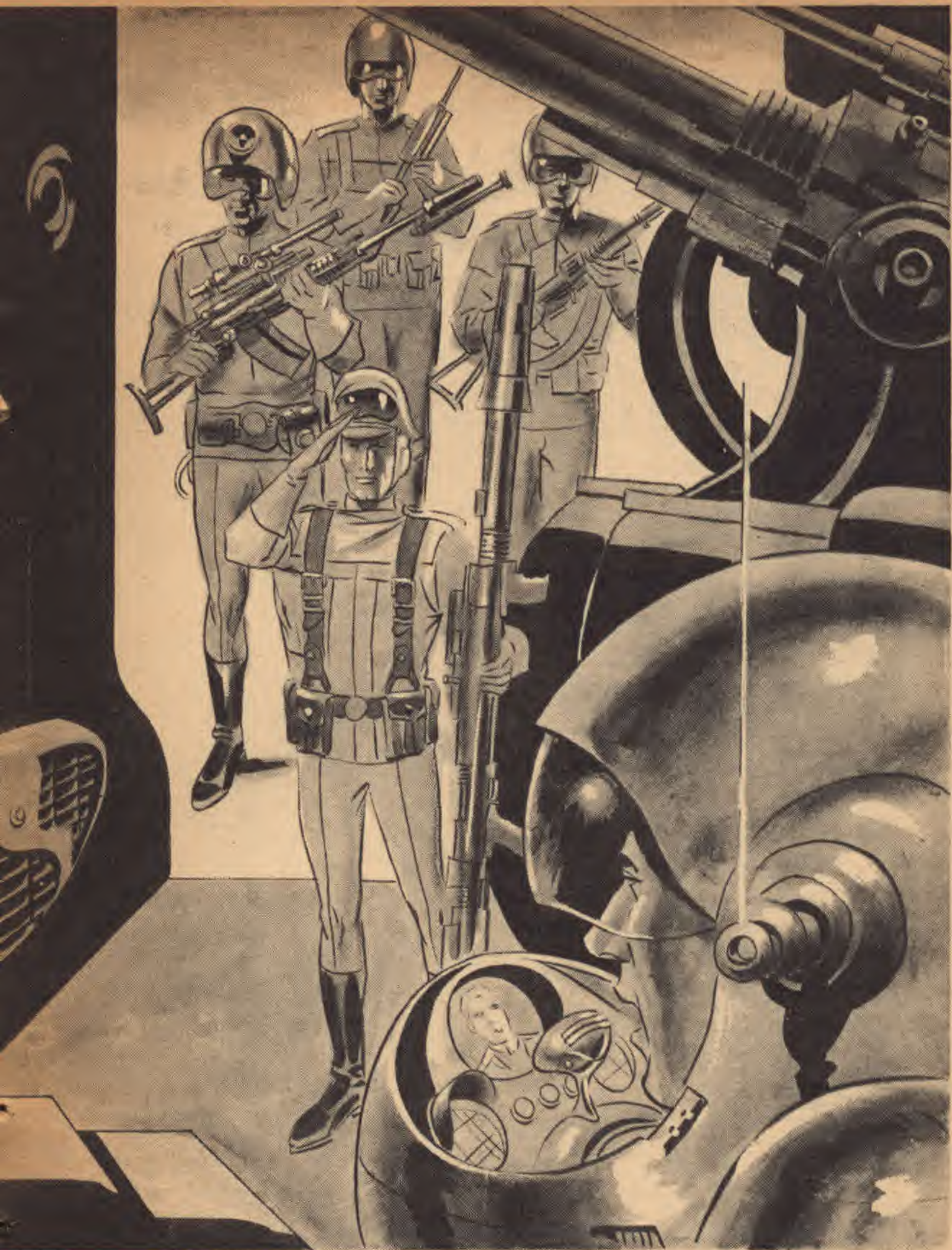
But they couldn't stop. And nobody could get inside to shut them off or even slow them down. And that torrent of goods, made for so many people who didn't exist, had to be moved. The advertising men had to do the moving, and they were excellent at the job.

SO that was the outside, a very, very busy place and a very, very big one. In spite of what happened in the big war.

I can't begin to tell you how busy it was or how big; I can only tell you about a little bit of it. There was a building called the Pentagon and it covered acres of ground. It had five sides, of course; one for the Army, one for the Navy, one for the Air Force, one for the Marines, and one for the offices of Yust & Ruminant.

So here's the Pentagon, this great big building, the nerve cen-





ter of the United States in every way that mattered. (There was also a "Capitol," as they called it, but that doesn't matter much. Didn't then, in fact.)

And here's Major Commaigne, in his scarlet dress uniform with his epaulettes and his little gilt sword. He's waiting in the ante-room of the Director's Office of Yust & Ruminant, nervously watching television. He's been waiting there for an hour, and then at last they send for him.

He goes in.

Don't try to imagine his emotions as he walks into that pigskin-paneled suite. You can't. But understand that he believes that the key to all of his future lies in this room; he believes that with all his heart and in a way, as it develops, he is right.

"Major," snaps an old man, a man very like Cogan and very like Jack Tighe, for they were all pretty much of a breed, those Ivy-League charcoal-grays, "Major, he's coming through. It's just as we feared. There has been trouble."

"Yes, sir!"

Major Commaigne is very erect and military in his bearing, because he has been an Army officer for fifteen years now and this is his first chance at combat. He missed the big war — well, the whole Army missed the big war; it was over too fast for moving troops — and fighting has pretty

much stopped since then. It isn't safe to fight, except under certain conditions. But maybe the conditions are right now, he thinks. And it can mean a lot to a major's career, these days, if he gets an expeditionary force to lead and acquits himself well with it!

So he stands erect, alert, sharp-eyed. His braided cap is tucked in the corner of one arm, and his other hand rests on the hilt of his sword, and he looks fierce. Why, that's natural enough, too. What comes in over the TV communicator in that pigskin-paneled office would make any honest Army officer look fierce. The authority of the United States has been flouted!

"L.S.," gasps the image of a tall, dark old man in the picture tube, "they've turned against me! They've seized my transmitter, neutralized my drugs, confiscated my subsonic gear. All I have left is this transmitter!"

And he isn't urbane any more, this man Cogan whose picture is being received in this room; he looks excited and he looks mad.

"Funny," comments Mr. Maffity, called "L.S." by his intimate staff, "that they didn't take the transmitter away too. They must have known you'd contact us and that there would be reprisals."

"But they *wanted* me to contact you!" cries the voice from the picture tube. "I told them what it

would mean. L.S., they're going crazy. They're spoiling for a fight."

And after a little more talk, L.S. Maffity turns off the set.

"We'll give it to them, eh, Major?" he says, as stern and straight as a ramrod himself.

"We will, sir!" says the major, and he salutes, spins around and leaves. Already he can feel the eagles on his shoulders — who knows, maybe even stars!

And that is how the punitive expedition came to be launched; and it was exactly what Pung's Corners could have expected as a result of their actions — could have, and did.

NOW I already told you that fighting had been out of fashion for some time, though getting *ready* to fight was a number-one preoccupation of a great many people. You must understand that there appeared to be no contradiction in these two contradictory facts, outside.

The big war had pretty much discouraged anybody from doing anything very violent. Fighting in the old-fashioned way — that is, with missiles and radio-dust and atomic cannon — had turned out to be expensive and for other reasons impractical. It was only the greatest of luck then that stopped things before the planet was wiped off, nice and clean, of everything more advanced than

the notochord, ready for the one-celled beasts of the sea to start over again. Now things were different.

First place, all atomic explosives were under *rigid* interdiction. There were a couple of dozen countries in the world that owned A-bombs or better, and every one of them had men on duty, twenty-four hours a day, with their fingers held ready over buttons that would wipe out for once and all whichever one of them might first use an atomic weapon again. So that was out.

And aircraft, by the same token, lost a major part of their usefulness. The satellites with their beady little TV eyes scanned every place every second, so that you didn't dare drop even an ordinary HE bomb as long as some nearsighted chap watching through a satellite relay might mistake it for something nuclear — and give the order to push one of those buttons.

This left, generally speaking, the infantry.

But what infantry it was! A platoon of riflemen was twenty-three men and it owned roughly the firepower of all of Napoleon's legions. A company comprised some twelve hundred and fifty, and it could singlehanded have won World War One.

Hand weapons spat out literally sheets of metal, projectiles firing

so rapidly one after another that you didn't so much try to shoot a target as to slice it in half. As far as the eye could see, a rifle bullet could fly. And where the eye was blocked by darkness, by fog or by hills, the sniperscope, the radarscreen and the pulse-beam interferometer sights could locate the target as though it were ten yards away at broad noon.

They were, that is to say, very modern weapons. In fact, the weapons that this infantry carried were so modern that half of each company was in process of learning to operate weapons that the other half had already discarded as obsolete. Who wanted a Magic-Eye Self-Aiming All-Weather Gunsight, Mark XXII, when a Mark XXIII, with Dubl-Jeweled Bearings, was available?

For it was one of the triumphs of the age that at last the planned obsolescence and high turnover of, say, a TV set or a Detroit car had been extended to carbines and bazookas.

It was wonderful and frightening to see.

IT was these heroes, then, who went off to war, or to whatever might come.

Major Commaigne (so he says in his book) took a full company of men, twelve hundred and fifty strong, and started out for Pung's Corners. Air brought them to the

plains of Lehigh County, burned black from radiation but no longer dangerous. From there, they journeyed by wheeled vehicles.

Major Commaigne was coldly confident. The radioactivity of the sands surrounding Pung's Corners was no problem. Not with the massive and perfect equipment he had for his force. What old Mr. Cogan could do, the United States Army could do better; Cogan drove inside sheet lead, but the expeditionary force cruised in solid iridium steel, with gamma-ray baffles fixed in place.

Each platoon had its own half-track personnel carrier. Not only did the men have their hand weapons, but each vehicle mounted a 105-mm explosive cannon, with Zip-Fire Auto-Load and Wizard-trol Safety Interlock. Fluid mountings sustained the gimbals of the cannon. Radar picked out its target. Automatic digital computers predicted and outguessed the flight of its prey.

In the lead personnel carrier, Major Commaigne barked a last word to his troops:

"This is it, men! The chips are down! You have trained for this a long time and now you're in the middle of it. I don't know how we're going to make out *in there*—" and he swung an arm in the direction of Pung's Corners, a gesture faithfully reproduced in living three-dimensional color on the in-

tercoms of each personnel carrier in his fleet— “but win or lose, and I know we’re going to win, I want every one of you to know that you belong to the best Company in the best Regiment of the best Combat Infantry Team of the best Division of—”

Crump went the 105-mm piece on the lead personnel carrier as radar range automatically sighted in and fired upon a moving object outside, thus drowning out the tributes he had intended to pay to Corps, to Army, to Group and to Command.

The battle for Pung’s Corners had begun.

VI

NOW that first target, it wasn’t any *body*.

It was only a milch cow, and one in need of freshening at that. She shouldn’t have been on the baseball field at all, but there she was, and since that was the direction from which the invader descended on the town, she made the supreme sacrifice. Without even knowing she’d done it, of course.

Major Commaigne snapped at his adjutant: “Lefferts! Have the ordnance sections put the one-oh-fives on safety. Can’t have this sort of thing.” It had been a disagreeable sight, to see that poor old cow become hamburger, well ketchuped, so rapidly. Better chain

the big guns until one saw, at any rate, whether Pung’s Corners was going to put up a fight.

So Major Commaigne stopped the personnel carriers and ordered everybody out. They were past the dangerous radioactive area anyway.

The troops fell out in a handsome line of skirmish; it was very, very fast and very, very good. From the top of the Presbyterian Church steeple in Pung’s Corners, Jack Tighe and Andy Grammis watched through field glasses, and I can tell you that Grammis was pretty near hysterics. But Jack Tighe only hummed and nodded.

Major Commaigne gave an order and every man in the line of skirmish instantly dug in. Some were in marsh and some in mud; some had to tunnel into solid rock and some—nearest where that first target had been — through a thin film of beef. It didn’t much matter, because they didn’t use the entrenching spades of World War II; they had Powr-Pakt Diggers that clawed into anything in seconds, and, what’s more, lined the pits with a fine ceramic glaze. It was magnificent.

And yet, on the other hand — Well, look. It was this way. Twenty-six personnel carriers had brought them here. Each carrier had its driver, its relief driver, its emergency alternate driver and its mechanic. It had its radar - and -

electronics repairman, and its radar-and-electronics repairman's assistant. It had its ordnance staff of four, and its liaison communications officer to man the intercom and keep in touch with the P.C. commander.

Well, they needed all those people, of course. Couldn't get along without them.

BUT that came to two hundred and eighty-two men.

Then there was the field kitchen, with its staff of forty-seven, plus administrative detachment and dietetic staff; the headquarters detachment, with paymaster's corps and military police platoon; the meteorological section, a proud sight as they began setting up their field teletypes and fax receivers and launching their weather balloons; the field hospital with eighty-one medics and nurses, nine medical officers and attached medical administrative staff; the special services detachment, prompt to begin setting up a three-D motion-picture screen in the lee of the parked personnel carriers and to commence organizing a handball tournament among the off-duty men; the four chaplains and chaplains' assistants, plus the Wisdom Counselor for Ethical Culturists, agnostics and waverers; the Historical Officer and his eight trained clerks, already going from foxhole to foxhole bravely carry-

ing tape recorders, to take down history as it was being made in the form of first-hand impressions of the battle that had yet to be fought; military observers from Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, the Scandinavian Confederation and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Inner Mongolia, with their orderlies and attaches; and, of course, field correspondents from *Stars & Stripes*, the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the Scripps-Howard chain, five wire services, eight television networks, an independent documentary motion-picture producer, and one hundred and twenty-seven other newspapers and allied public information outlets.

It was a stripped-down combat command, naturally. Therefore, there was only one Public Information Officer per reporter.

Still . . .

Well, it left exactly forty-six riflemen in line of skirmish.

UP IN the Presbyterian belfry, Andy Grammis wailed: "Look at them, Jack! I don't know, maybe letting advertising back into Pung's Corners wouldn't be so bad. All right, it's a rat race, but —"

"Wait," said Jack Tighe quietly, and hummed.

They couldn't see it very well, but the line of skirmish was in some confusion. The word had been passed down that all the field

pieces had been put on safety and that the entire firepower of the company rested in their forty-six rifles. Well, that wasn't so bad; but after all, they had been equipped with E-Z-Fyre Revolv-a-Clip Car-bines until ten days before the expeditionary force had been mounted. Some of the troops hadn't been fully able to familiarize themselves with the new weapons.

It went like this:

"Sam," called one private to the man in the next foxhole. "Sam, listen, I can't figure this something rifle out. When the something green light goes on, does that mean that the something safety is off?"

"Beats the something hell out of me," rejoined Sam, his brow furrowed as he pored over the full-color, glossy-paper operating manual, alluringly entitled, *The Five-Step Magic-Eye Way to New Combat Comfort and Security*. "Did you see what it says here? It says, 'Magic-Eye in Off position is provided with positive Fayl-Sayf action, thus assuring Evr-Kleen Cartridge of dynamic ejection and release, when used in combination with Shoulder-Eez Anti-Recoil Pads.'"

"What did you say, Sam?"

"I said it beats the something hell out of me," said Sam, and pitched the manual out into no-man's-land before him.

But he was sorry and immediately crept out to retrieve it, for although the directions seemed intended for a world that had no relation to the rock-and-mud terra firma around Pung's Corners, all of the step-by-step instructions in the manual were illustrated by mockup photographs of starlets in Bikinis — for the cavern factories produced instruction manuals as well as weapons. They had to, obviously, and they were good at it; the more complicated the directions, the more photographs they used. The vehicular ones were downright shocking.

SOME minutes later: "They don't seem to be doing anything," ventured Andy Grammis, watching from the steeple.

"No, they don't, Andy. Well, we can't sit up here forever. Come along and we'll see what's what."

Now Andy Grammis didn't want to do that, but Jack Tighe was a man you didn't resist very well, and so they climbed down the winding steel stairs and picked up the rest of the Pung's Corners Independence Volunteers, all fourteen of them, and they started down Front Street and out across the baseball diamond.

Twenty-six personnel carriers electronically went *ping*, and the turrets of their one-oh-fives swiveled to zero in on the Independence Volunteers.

Forty-six riflemen, swearing, attempted to make Akur-A-C Green-line Sighting Strip cross Horizon Blue True-Site Band in the Up-Close radar screens of their rifles.

And Major Commaigne, howling mad, waved a sheet of paper under the nose of his adjutant. "What kind of something nonsense is *this*?" he demanded, for a soldier is a soldier regardless of his rank. "I can't take those men out of line with the enemy advancing on us!"

"Army orders, sir," said the adjutant impenetrably. He had got his doctorate in Military Jurisprudence at Harvard Law and he knew whose orders meant what to whom. "The rotation plan isn't my idea, sir. Why not take it up with the Pentagon?"

"But, Lefferts, you idiot, I can't get through to the Pentagon! Those something newspapermen have the channels sewed up solid! And now you want me to take every front-line rifleman out and send him to a rest camp for three weeks —"

"No, sir," corrected the adjutant, pointing to a line in the order. "Only for twenty days, sir, *including* travel time. But you'd best do it right away, sir, I expect. The order's marked 'priority.'"

Well, Major Commaigne was no fool. Never mind what they said later. He had studied the catastrophe of Von Paulus at Stalingrad

and Lee's heaven-sent escape from Gettysburg, and he knew what could happen to an expeditionary force in trouble in enemy territory. Even a big one. And his, you must remember, was very small.

HE knew that when you're on your own, everything becomes your enemy; frost and diarrhea destroyed more of the Nazi Sixth Army than the Russians did; the jolting wagons of Lee's retreat put more of his wounded and sick out of the way than Meade's cannon. So he did what he had to do.

"Sound the retreat!" he bawled. "We're going back to the barn."

Retire and regroup; why not? But it wasn't as simple as that.

The personnel carriers backed and turned like a fleet in maneuvers. Their drivers were trained for that. But one PC got caught in Special Service's movie screen and blundered into another, and a flotilla of three of them found themselves stymied by the spreading pre-fabs of the field hospital. Five of them, doing extra duty in running electric generators from the power takeoffs at their rear axles, were immobilized for fifteen minutes and then boxed in.

What it came down to was that four of the twenty-six were in shape to move right then. And obviously that wasn't enough, so it wasn't a retreat at all; it was a disaster.

"There's only one thing to do," brooded Major Commaigne amid the turmoil, with manly tears streaming down his face, "but how I wish I'd never tried to make lieutenant colonel!"

SO Jack Tighe received Commaigne's surrender. Jack Tighe didn't act surprised. I can't say the same for the rest of the Independence Volunteers.

"No, Major, you may keep your sword," said Jack Tighe kindly. "And all of the officers may keep their Pinpoint Levl-Site No-Jolt sidearms."

"Thank you, sir," wept the major, and blundered back into the officer's club which the Headquarters Detachment had never stopped building.

Jack Tighe looked after him with a peculiar and thoughtful expression.

William LaFarge, swinging a thirty-inch hickory stick — it was

all he'd been able to pick up as a weapon — babbled: "It's a great victory! Now they'll leave us alone, I bet!"

Jack Tighe didn't say a single word.

"Don't you think so, Jack? Won't they stay away now?"

Jack Tighe looked at him blankly, seemed about to answer and then turned to Charley Frink. "Charley. Listen. Don't you have a shotgun put away somewhere?"

"Yes, Mr. Tighe. And a .22. Want me to get them?"

"Why, yes, I think I do." Jack Tighe watched the youth run off. His eyes were hooded. And then he said: "Andy, do something for us. Ask the major to give us a P.O.W. driver who knows the way to the Pentagon."

And a few minutes later, Charley came back with the shotgun and the .22; and the rest, of course, is history.

— FREDERIK POHL

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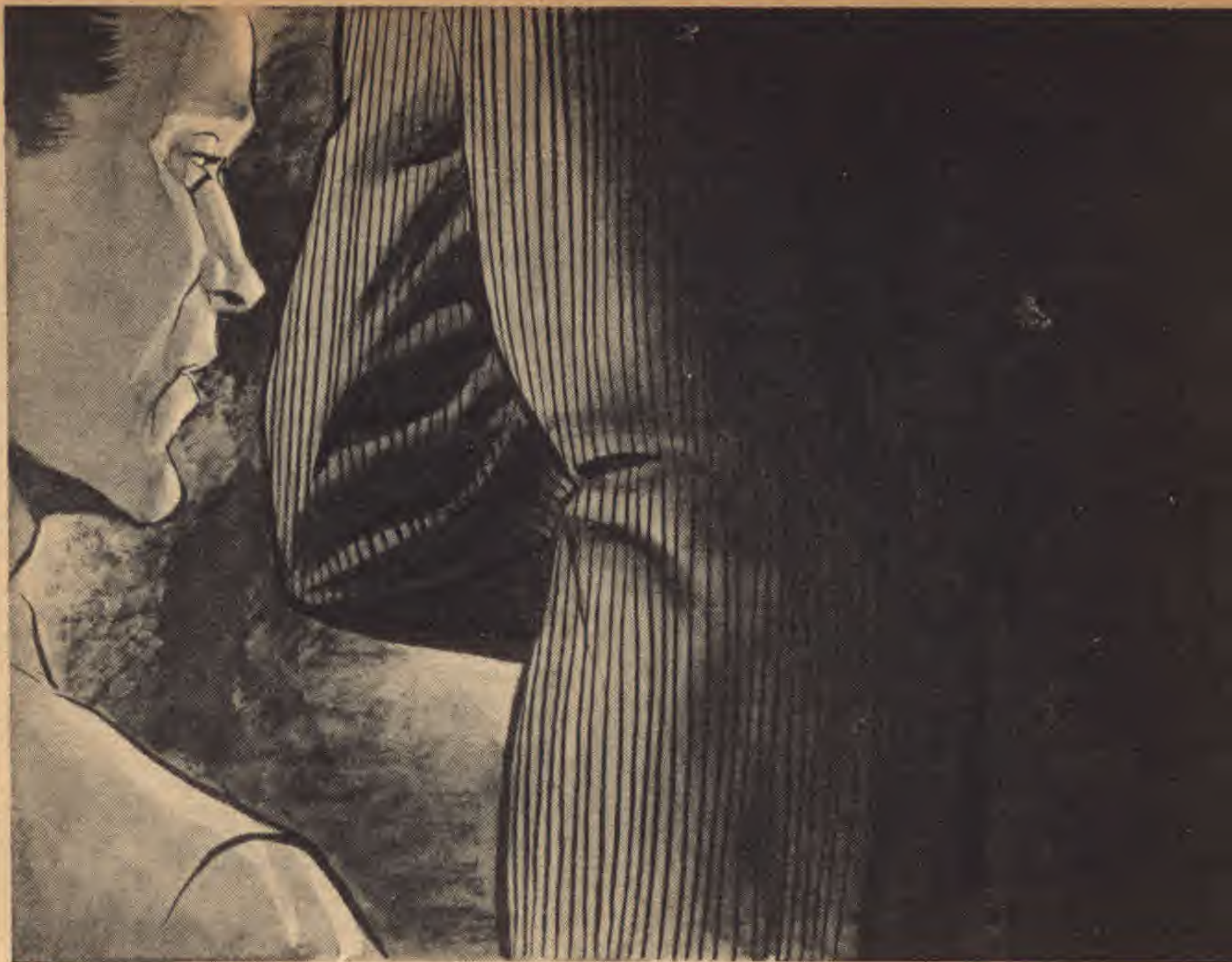
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By WILLIAM TENN

***Be warned by Alfred's chilling experience
— don't check into a hotel under the name
of Smith — especially if that's your name!***

Illustrated by WOOD



THE telephone rang. Alfred Smith, who had been hauling clothes out of his valise and stuffing them into the typical hotel room bureau, looked up, startled.

"Now who — " he began, and shook his head.

Obviously it must be a wrong number. Nobody knew he was in New York, and nobody — this for a certainty — knew he had checked into this particular hotel. Or, come to think of it, somebody did.

The room clerk at the desk where he had just registered.

Must be some hotel business. Something like don't use the lamp on the end table—it tends to short-circuit.

The telephone rang again. He dropped the valise and circled the bed. He picked up the phone.

"Yes?" he said.

"Mr. Smith?" came a thick voice from the other end.

"Speaking."

"This is Mr. Jones. Mr. Cohen

and Mr. Kelly are with me in the lobby. So is Jane Doe. Do you want us to come up or shall we wait for you?"

"Huh?"

"Well, then, we'll come up. Room 504, isn't it?"

"Yes, but wait a minute! *Who* did you say?" He realized the man had hung up.

ALFRED Smith put down the telephone and ran his fingers through his crew-cut. He was a moderately tall, moderately athletic, moderately handsome young man with only the faintest hint at jowl and belly of recent prosperity.

"Mr. Jones? Cohen? Kelly? And, for suffering sake, *Jane Doe*?"

It must be a joke. Any Smith was used to jokes on his name. What was your name before it was Smith? *Alfred* Smith? Whatever happened to good old Johnnie?

Then he remembered that his caller had just asked for Mr. Smith. Smith was a common name, like it or not.

He picked up the phone again. "Desk," he told the operator.

"Desk," a smooth voice said.

"This is Mr. Smith in Room 504. Was there another Smith registered here before me?"

A long pause. "Are you having any trouble, sir?"

Alfred Smith grimaced. "That's not what I'm asking. Was there or wasn't there?"

"Well, sir, if you could tell me if it is causing you inconvenience in any way . . ."

He got exasperated. "I asked you a simple question. Was there a Smith in this room before me? What's the matter, did he kill himself?"

"We have no right to believe he committed suicide, sir!" the desk clerk said emphatically. "There are many, *many* circumstances under which a guest might disappear after registering for a room!"

There was a peremptory knock on the door. Alfred Smith grunted, "Okay, that's all I wanted to know," and hung up.

He opened the door, and before he could say anything, four people came in. Three were men, the last was a mildly attractive woman.

"Now look —" he started to protest.

"Hello, Gar-Pitha," one of the men said. "I'm Jones. This is Cohen and this is Kelly. And, of course, this is Jane Doe."

"There's been a mistake," Alfred told him.

"And how there's been a mistake!" said Cohen, locking the door behind him carefully. "Jones, you called Smith by his right name — when the corridor door was open! That's unpardonable stupidity."

Jane Doe nodded. "Door open or door closed, we must remember that we are on Earth. We will use

only Earth names. Operating Procedure Regulations XIV-XXII."

Alfred took a long, slow look at her. "On Earth?"

She smiled shamefacedly. "There I go myself, doing practically the same thing. You're right. In *America*. Or rather, to put it more exactly and less suspiciously, in New York City."

Mr. Kelly had been walking around Alfred, staring at him. "You're perfect," he said at last. "Better than any of us. That disguise took a lot of hard, patient work. Don't tell me, I know. You're perfect, Smith, perfect."

WHAT in the world were they, Alfred wondered frantically—lunatics? No, *spies*! Should he say something, should he give the mistake away, or should he start yelling his head off for help? But maybe they weren't spies — maybe they were detectives on the trail of spies. He was in New York, after all. New York wasn't the hinterlands of Illinois.

And that suggested another possibility. New York, the home of the sharpie, the smart aleck. It could be a simple practical joke being played by some city slickers on a new hayseed.

If it was . . .

His visitors had found seats for themselves. Mr. Kelly opened the briefcase he was carrying and grubbed around in it with his fin-

gers. A low hum filled the room.

"Not enough power," Mr. Kelly apologized. "This is a small sun, you know. But give the rig a few minutes; it'll build up."

Mr. Jones leaned forward. "Listen, do you folks mind if I slip out of my disguise? I'm hot."

"You're not supposed to," Jane Doe reminded him. "The uniform is to be worn at all times when we're on duty."

"I know, I know, but Sten-Durok — oops, I mean Cohen — locked the door. Nobody comes in through windows in this particular place, and we don't have to worry about materialization. So how about I relax for a second or two?"

Alfred had perched on the edge of the dresser. He looked Mr. Jones over with great amusement. The pudgy little man was wearing a cheap gray sharkskin suit. He was bald, he wore no eyeglasses, he had no beard. He didn't even have a mustache.

Disguise, eh?

"I say let him," Alfred suggested with an anticipatory chuckle. "We're all alone — he might as well be comfortable. Go ahead, Jones, *take off* your disguise."

"Thanks," Jones said with feeling. "I'm suffocating in this outfit."

Alfred chuckled again. He'd show these New Yorkers.

"Take it off. Be comfortable. Make yourself at home."

Jones nodded and unbuttoned

the jacket of his gray sharkskin suit. Then he unbuttoned the white shirt under it. Then he put his two forefingers into his chest, all the way in, and pulled his chest apart. He kept pulling until there was a great dark hole about ten inches wide.

A BLACK spider squirmed out of the opening. Its round little body was about the size of a man's fist, its legs about the size and length of pipe stems. It crouched on Jones' chest, while the body from which it had emerged maintained its position in a kind of paralysis, the fingers still holding the chest apart, the back and legs still resting comfortably in the chair.

"Whew!" said the spider. "That feels good."

Alfred found he couldn't stop chuckling. He finally managed to halt the noise from his mouth, but it kept on going in his head. He stared at the spider, at the stiff body from which it had come. Then, near panic, he stared at the others in the room, at Cohen, at Kelly, at Jane Doe.

They couldn't have looked less interested.

The hum from the briefcase on Kelly's knees abruptly resolved itself into words. Alfred's visitors stopped acting bored and leaned forward attentively, looking at the small lens that rose on a slender

periscopic rod and revolved slowly, pausing briefly at each person.

"Greetings, Special Emissaries," said the voice. "This is Command Central speaking. Robinson, to you. Are there any reports of significance?"

"None from me," Jane Doe said.

"Nor me," from Kelly.

"Nothing new yet," said Cohen.

The spider stretched itself luxuriously. "Same here. Nothing to report."

"Jones!" ordered the voice from the briefcase. "Get back into your uniform!"

"It's *hot*, Chief. And we're all alone in here, sitting behind what they call a locked door. We don't have anything to worry about."

"I'll tell you what and what not to worry about. You get into that uniform, Jones! Or maybe you're tired of being a Special Emissary? Maybe you'd like to be demoted to General Emissary status?"

The spider stretched its legs and performed what could only be described as a shrug. Then it backed carefully into the hole in the chest. The hole closed behind it. The body of Jones came to life and buttoned his shirt and jacket.

"That's better," said the voice from the briefcase on Kelly's knee. "Don't ever do that again while you're on duty."

"Okay, Chief, okay. But couldn't we cool down this planet? You

know, start a new ice age? It would make it a lot easier to work."

"And a lot easier to be detected, stupid. You worry about the big things like conventions and beauty contests. We'll worry about the little things here, in Command Central, like arbitrarily starting new ice ages. All right, Smith, how about you? What's your report?"

STARTLED, Alfred Smith shook the thick gathered wool out of his head, slid off the dresser and onto his feet. He looked around wildly.

"Re-report?" A breath. "Why, nothing — nothing to report."

"Took you a long time to make up your mind about it. You're not holding anything back, are you? Remember, it's our job to evaluate information, not yours."

Alfred wet his lips. "N-no. I'm not holding anything back."

"You'd better not. One beauty contest you forget to tell us about and you're through, Smith. We still haven't forgotten that boner you pulled in Zagreb."

"Now, Chief," Jane Doe intervened, "that was only a local stunt to discover who was the tallest card-carrying Communist in Croatia. You can't blame Smith for missing *that*."

"We certainly can blame Smith for that. It was a beauty contest, within the definition of the term

you were given. If Cohen hadn't stumbled across a mention of it in the *Kiev Pravda*, all hell could have broken loose. Remember that, Smith. And stop calling me *Chief*, all of you. The name is Robinson. Remember that, too."

They all nodded, Alfred with them. He shot a mixed look of uncertainty and gratitude at Jane Doe.

"All right," the voice went on, somewhat mollified. "And to show you that I can hand out the boosts as well as the knocks, I want to commend Smith on his disguise. It's a little off-beat, but it rings true — and that's the main thing. If the rest of you only spent as much time and care on your uniforms, we'd be in the home stretch —" the voice paused and took on an oily, heavily whimsical quality — "before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'"

They all laughed dutifully at that one, even Alfred.

"You think Smith did a good job on his disguise, don't you, Chief — I mean, Mr. Robinson?" Jane Doe asked eagerly, as if she wanted to underline the fact for everyone.

"I certainly do. Look at that suit. It's not just any old suit, but a tweed jacket and flannel pants. Now that's what I call using your imagination. His chin isn't just a chin, it's a *cleft* chin. Very good. The color of his hair

— first-rate. The only thing I might possibly object to is the bow tie. I'd say a good solid rep tie, regular length, would be a little less chancy, a little less likely to attract attention. But it feels right, and that's the main thing — the *feel* of the disguise. In this business, you either have an instinct for merging with the population of the planet, or you don't. I think Smith has it. Good work, Smith."

"Thank you," Alfred mumbled.

"All right, Ch — er — Robinson," Mr. Jones said impatiently. "It's a good uniform-disguise. But it's not that important. Our work is more important than how we look."

"Your work is how you look. If you look right, you work right. Take yourself, for example, Jones. A more nondescript, carelessly assembled human being, I don't think I've ever come across before. What are you supposed to be — Mr. American-Man-in-the-Street?"

MR. Jones looked deeply hurt. "I'm supposed to be a Brooklyn druggist. And believe me, the uniform is plenty good enough. I know. You should see some of these druggists."

"Some, Jones, but not most. And that's my point."

There was a throat-clearing sound from Mr. Cohen. "Don't want to interrupt you, Robinson, but this isn't supposed to be a long visit we're having with Smith. We

just dropped up, kind of."

"Right, Cohen, right on the old button. Everybody ready for instructions?"

"Ready," they all chorused, Alfred coming in raggedly on the last syllable.

"Here we go then. Cohen, you're back on your old assignment, keeping careful check on any new beauty contests scheduled anywhere in the country, with special attention to be paid to New York, of course. Kelly, you're to do the same with conventions. Jane Doe and John Smith will continue to look into anything that might be a camouflaged attempt."

"Anything particular in mind?" Jane Doe asked.

"Not for you at the moment. You just keep making the rounds of beauty parlors and see if you stumble across something. Smith, we have a special item we'd like you to look into. There's a fancy dress ball of the plumbers of the New York City area. Drop down there and see what you can see. And let us know if you hit it. Fast."

Alfred kept his voice determinedly casual. "What do you want me to look out for?"

"Well, if you don't know by this time—" The voice from the briefcase rose impatiently. "Door prizes, an award for the best costume, even a contest for Miss Pipe Wrench of 1921 or whatever year

Earth is in right now. I don't think we have to worry about that last, though. It would be too damn obvious, and we haven't hit anything obvious yet."

"How about me?" Jones wanted to know.

"We'll have special instructions for you pretty soon. There may be a new angle."

They all looked interested at that, but the voice from the briefcase did not seem disposed to elucidate further.

"That will be all," it said unequivocally. "You can start leaving now."

Mr. Kelly zipped the briefcase shut, nodded at everyone, and left.

A few moments later, Mr. Cohen followed him. Then Jones yawned and said, "Well, good-bye now." He closed the door behind him.

JANE Doe rose, but she didn't go toward the door. She came over to where Alfred Smith was standing with a punched expression in his eyes.

"Well, John?" she said softly.

Alfred Smith couldn't think of anything to say to that except, "Well, Jane?"

"We're together again. Working on an assignment again, together. Isn't it wonderful?"

He nodded slowly, carefully. "Yes. Wonderful."

"And if we can only close it up this time, finish the whole nasty

business once and for all, we'll be going back together."

"And then?"

Her eyes glistened. "You know, darling. A quiet little web somewhere, just for two. You and I alone. And piles and piles of eggs."

Alfred gulped, and, in spite of himself, turned away.

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling," she cried, taking his hand. "I've upset you. I was talking out of uniform. Well, then, put it this way. A cottage small by a waterfall. And baby makes three. You and I, down the golden years together. When your hair has turned to silver. There! Is that better?"

"Lots," he managed to get out, goggling appalledly at her. "Lots better."

She threw her arms around him. He realized he was expected to respond, and squeezed back.

"Oh, I don't care," she whispered into his ear. "I don't care about discipline or anything when I'm close to you. And I'll say it, even if Command Central is listening. Darling, do you know what I'd like right now?"

Alfred sighed. He was more than half afraid of what was coming. "No, what? What would you like right now?"

"I'd like for us to be out of uniform, scuttling about and over each other in some damp, dark place. I'd like to feel your claws upon me, your antennae caressing

me — me — instead of this clumsy, emotionless disguise I'm wearing."

He gulped. "It — it'll come. Be patient, darling."

SHE straightened up and became businesslike again. "Yes, and I'd better be going. Here's a list of all our telephone numbers, in case you want to get in touch with any of us. Don't forget, this operation is to be conducted strictly according to regulations. And that means no *phmpffing*, no *phmpffing* at all, except in the greatest emergency. For everything else, we use telephones."

"Telephones?" he found himself echoing.

"Yes." She gestured to the black instrument on its stand near the bed. "Those things."

"Oh, *those* things," he repeated, fighting the impulse to shake his head hard in a cloud-clearing gesture. "Yes. Those things. But no — no — what did you say?"

"No *phmpffing*."

"None at all?" Surely, if he continued to ask questions, something would become clear. And sane!

Jane Doe looked extremely concerned. "Of course not! This is a maximum operation."

"Yes, that's right," he agreed. "A maximum operation. I'd forgotten it was maximum."

"Well, don't," she advised him earnestly. "Don't do any forgetting. As Mr. Robinson warned you, one

more boner like the one you pulled in Zagreb, darling, and you're through. You'll be kicked out of the Service. And then what do you think will happen to our plans together?"

"We'll be finished, huh?" Alfred studied her. Under all that girl-flesh, he reminded himself, there was a large, black spider working at controls like an operator in a steam shovel.

"Right. I'd never marry outside the Service. We'd be finished. So do take care of yourself, darling, and give it all you've got. Stay on the ball. Fly right. Get with it. Rise and shine. Stick to the straight and narrow. Go in there and pitch. Don't let George do it. Work hard and save your money. Early to bed and early to rise. Don't be half safe."

"I'll do my best," he promised, his voice rattling

"My little crawler," she whispered intimately, and kissed him on the ear.

She closed the door behind her.

ALFRED groped his way to the bed. After a while, he noticed that he was uncomfortable. He was sitting on a valise. Absent-mindedly, he shoved it to the floor.

What had he wandered into? Or, to put it more accurately, what had wandered into him?

Spies. Yes, they were obviously spies. But *such* spies . . . spies from

another planet. What were they spying on — beauty contests, conventions, plumbers' fancy dress balls? What were they looking for? What in the world — or, rather, the Galaxy — *could* they be looking for?

One thing was perfectly clear. They were up to no good. That omnipresent contempt whenever they mentioned Earth or the things of Earth.

An advance wave of invaders? Scouts preparing the way for the main body? They could be that.

But why beauty contests? Why fancy dress balls?

What was there of value that they could possibly learn from sweaty clambakes like these?

You'd expect to find them at nuclear research labs, at rocket proving grounds, skulking about the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Alfred decided there was no point in trying to follow their thought processes. They were completely alien creatures; who knew what kind of information they might consider valuable, what might be important to them?

But they were undoubtedly spies sizing up Earth for an invasion to come.

"Filthy little spiders," he growled.

And one of them was in love with him. One intended to marry him. What was it she had said — piles and piles of eggs? A pretty

thought! He shuddered from his neck to his knees.

But they believed he was this other Smith, John Smith. Earth still had a chance. Pure luck had given Earth a counter-spy. Him.

He felt frightened, but a little proud. A counter-spy.

Alfred Smith reached for the telephone. "Desk!"

There was precious little information from the clerk to supplement what he had been given before. John Smith had registered here two weeks ago. He had left one afternoon and not come back. After the usual interval, it was assumed he had skipped, since he owed a few days on the bill at the time. His belongings were in the hotel storeroom.

"No, sir, I'm sorry, sir, but hotel regulations do not permit us to let you go through his belongings. Unless you wish to claim a relationship."

"And if I did?" Alfred asked eagerly. "If I did wish to claim a relationship?"

"Then it would be necessary for you to establish proof, sir."

"I see. Well, thank you very much." He hung up.

WHERE was he now? This John Smith had registered here, evidently under a previous agreement, as his room was to provide the meeting place for the entire group. Then he had walked out

one day and had not returned.

Since the disguises were subject to frequent change, when another Smith had registered in the same room, the spies assumed it was their man. They may not even have known of the lapse of time between the two Smiths.

What had happened to John Smith? Had he defected to the United States government? To the United Nations? Hardly. There would be an F.B.I. man, a small Army unit staked out in the room in that case when John Smith's friends showed up.

No, he had just disappeared. But was he dead, killed in some accident, or was he only temporarily away, working on some newly discovered angle for his interplanetary organization?

And what would happen to Alfred when he returned?

The young man on the bed shivered. Espionage groups, he recalled from the novels he had read, tended to a sort of hatchetman justice. They would not let an Earthman with knowledge of their operations go on living.

He had to get help.

But from where? The police? The F.B.I.?

He shivered again at the picture evoked: himself, somewhat embarrassed, stammering a bit, not quite remembering all the details, telling this story to a hard-faced interrogator.

I NTERPLANETARY invasion, Mr. Smith? From Mars? Oh, not from Mars — from where then? Oh, you don't quite know, Mr. Smith? All you're sure of is that it's an interplanetary invasion? I see. And how did you happen to hear of this on your first day in New York? Oh, four people came up to your hotel room and told you about it? Very interesting. Very, very interesting. And their names were Mr. Cohen, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Jones and Jane Doe? And *your* name is Smith, isn't it? And all we have to do to prove your story is locate the address of one of these telephone numbers, cut open the person in whose name the phone is registered and find a big black spider inside . . .

"No!" Alfred groaned aloud. He'd be a full-fledged matriculant at a laughing academy in no time flat.

He needed proof — tangible proof. And facts. Mostly he needed facts. Who were these spiders, what was their home planet, when were they planning to invade, what kind of weapons did they have at their disposal — information like that. And lots and lots of data about their organization here on Earth, especially in America.

How did you get such data? You couldn't ask — that would be the surest way to expose yourself as a bona fide human with nothing more interesting inside you than

the girders, tubing, pumps and vats common to your race and no other.

But they'd given him an assignment. Something about a plumbers' fancy dress ball. Now, obviously, an assignment like that concerned their plans, their organization. Obviously.

He grabbed for the phone.

"Desk? This is Mr. Smith in 504. Yes, Mr. Smith *again*. Listen, how do I find out where the plumbers are in New York?"

"If the plumbing in your room is out of order, sir," the smooth, patient voice explained, "the hotel will send up a —"

"No, no, no! I don't want a plumber, I want *plumbers*, *all* of them! The New York plumbers, how do I find them?"

He distinctly heard lips being licked at the other end as this question was digested and then, aside, a whispered comment, "Yeah, it's 504 again. We got a real pip in that room this time. I don't envy the night man tonight!" Loudly and clearly, if just a shade less smoothly, the voice replied: "You will find a classified telephone directory on the desk near your bed, sir. You can look up plumbers under *P*. Most of the plumbers in Manhattan are listed there. For plumbers in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island, I would suggest —"

"I don't want plumbers in Brooklyn or the Bronx! I don't

even want plumbers in —" Alfred Smith drew a deep breath. He had to get a grip on himself! The fate of the entire planet, of the entire human race depended on his keeping his head.

HE forced his mind backward, inch by inch, off the plateau of hysteria it had mounted. He waited until his voice was calm.

"This is the problem," he said, slowly and carefully. "There is a fancy dress ball of the plumbers of the New York area. It's being held somewhere in the city tonight and I'm supposed to be there. Unfortunately, I've lost my invitation and it contained the address. Now how do you think I could go about finding where the ball is going to be?" He congratulated himself on the swiftness of his thinking. This was really being a counter-spy!

Pause. "I could make some inquiries, sir, through the usual channels, and call you back." And aside: "Now he says *he's* a plumber and he wants to go to a fancy dress ball. Can you beat that? I tell you . . . in this business . . ." And to him: "Would that be satisfactory, sir?"

"Fine," Alfred Smith replied enthusiastically. "That would be *fine*."

He hung up. Well, he was getting the hang of this espionage business. Nothing like a sales background for practice in quick think-

ing and even quicker talking.

He didn't have to report to the office until tomorrow. That gave him this afternoon and this evening to save the human race.

Who would have thought when he was offered a job in New York with the BlakSeme Company ("Men Notice BlakSemes—They're so Shockingly Stocking!") what tremendous stakes he'd be playing for on the very day of his arrival?

Of course, BlakSeme knew what kind of man he was; they knew he was executive timber or they'd never have hired him right out from under PuzzleKnit, their biggest competitor. He'd made quite a name for himself, Alfred Smith was modestly willing to admit, in the Illinois territory. Highest sales increases for three years running, steadiest repeat orders for five. But to PuzzleKnit Nylons ("Puzzle-Knit Attracts Their Attention and Keeps Them Guessing"), he had just been a top-notch salesman; it had taken BlakSeme, with their upper-bracket, Madison Avenue orientation, to see him as a possible district sales manager.

BlakSeme alone had seen he was big league material. But even they had not guessed how big a league it was in which he was destined to play.

The desk clerk called back. "I find, sir, that there is a fancy dress ball of the boss plumbers and steamfitters of the Metropolitan

New York area. It's at Menshevik Hall on Tenth Avenue at eight o'clock tonight. The theme of the ball is the *ancien régime* in France, and only people in pre-French Revolution costumes will be admitted. Would you like the name of a place near the hotel where you can rent the right costume for the occasion?"

"Yes," Alfred Smith babbled. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Things were beginning to click! He was on the trail of the aliens' organization!

ALFRED went out immediately and hurriedly selected a Duc de Richelieu outfit. Since some small alterations were necessary, he had time to eat dinner before the costume would be delivered at his hotel. He ate carefully and nutritiously: this was going to be a big night. His reading matter throughout the meal was a booklet he'd picked up in the outfitting place, a booklet giving the descriptions and background of all the costumes available for this period — sixteenth to eighteenth century France. Any fact might be the vital clue . . .

Back in his room, he tore off his clothes and pulled on the rented apparel. He was a little disappointed at the result. He did not quite look like a Gray Eminence. More like a young executive in Cardinal's clothing. But then he



found the scrap of gray beard in the box that belonged with the costume and fitted it on. It made all the difference.

Talk about your disguises! Here his whole body was supposed to be a disguise, a disguise which was the uniform of the aliens' Special Agents Division, of their terrestrial spy service. And now he was disguising that supposed disguise with a real one — just as, by being a supposed spy, he he was laying a trap for all the real secret operatives.

Alfred Smith — one lone man against the aliens!

"So that," he whispered reverently, "government of humans, by humans and for humans shall not perish from the Earth."

The telephone. It was Jones.

"Just got word from Robinson, Smith. That special mission of mine. It looks like tonight's the night."

"Tonight, eh?" Alfred Smith felt the lace tighten around his throat.

"Yes, they're going to try to contact tonight. We still don't know where — just that it's in New York City. I'm to be on reserve; I'll rush around to whoever finds the contact. You know, reinforce, lend a helping hand, be a staunch ally, give an assist to, help out in a pinch, stand back to back till hell freezes over. You'll be at the plumbers' ball, won't you? Where is it?"

Alfred shook his head violently to clear it of the fog of clichés thrown out by Jones. "Menshevik Hall. Tenth Avenue. What do I do if I — if I discover the contact?"

"You *phmpff*, guy, *phmpff* like mad. And I'll come a-running. Forget about telephones if you discover the contact. Also forget about special delivery mail, passenger pigeon, pony express rider, wireless telegraphy and couriers from His Majesty. Discovering the contact comes under the heading of 'emergency' under Operating Procedure Regulations XXXIII-XLIX, inclusive. So *phmpff* your foolish head off."

"Right! Only thing, Jones — "

There was a click at the other end as Jones hung up.

Tonight, Alfred Smith thought grimly, staring into the mirror. Tonight's the night!

For *what*?

MENSHEVIK Hall was a gray two-story building on the draftiest section of Tenth Avenue. The lower floor was a saloon through whose greasy windows a neon sign proclaimed:

THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION WAS
THE ONLY REAL REVOLUTION
BAR & GRILL

BEER — WINES — CHOICE LIQUORS
Alexei Ivanovich Anphimov, Prop.

The second floor was brightly lit. Music oozed out of its windows. There was a hand-printed sign on

a doorway to one side of the bar:

BOSS PLUMBERS AND STEAMFITTERS
OF THE METROPOLITAN
NEW YORK AREA

SEMI-ANNUAL FANCY DRESS BALL
You Must Be in Costume to
Be Admitted Tonight

(If you haven't paid your association dues for this quarter, see Bill Bushke at the bar before going upstairs — Bushke's wearing a Man in the Iron Mask costume and he's drinking rum and Seven-Up)

Alfred Smith climbed the creaky wooden stairs apprehensively, his eyes on the burly General Montcalm guarding the entrance at the top. To his relief, however, no invitation or ticket was demanded: his costume was sufficient validation. The red-faced general barely gave him a glance from under the plushly decorated cocked hat before waving him through.

It was crowded inside. Scores of Louis XIII's, XIV's, XV's and XVI's were dancing sedately with Annes of Austria and Marie Antoinettes to the strains of rumba and cha-cha. Overhead, two colored chandeliers rotated slowly, unwinding the spectrum upon the glittering waxed floor.

Where did he begin? He glanced at the platform where the musicians sat; they alone were not in costume. Lettering on the bass drum told the world that "Ole Olsen and His Latin Five" were providing the rhythms, but that did not seem like much to go on.

No one here looked like an interstellar spy.

On the other hand, neither did Jones, Cohen, Kelly or Jane Doe. They looked almost spectacularly ordinary. That was it: you had to find these people in the unlikeliest, most prosaic places.

Pleased by the inspiration, he went into the men's room.

At first, he thought he had hit it exactly right. The place was crowded. Sixteen or so Musketeers stood around the wash-basin, munching enormous cigars and conversing in low voices.

HE insinuated himself among them and listened closely. Their talk was eclectic, ranging freely from the wholesale price of pastel-colored water closets to the problems of installing plumbing in a new housing development on Long Island that was surrounded by unsewered streets.

"I told the contractor to his face," said a somewhat sallow, undersized Musketeer, knocking his cigar ash off against the pommel of his sword, "'Joe,' I told him, 'how can you expect me to lay pipe when you don't even know the capacity, let alone the type — look, we won't even talk about the type — of the sewer system they're going to have installed out here? Joe,' I said to him, 'you're a bright guy: I ask you, Joe, is that fair, does that make sense? You want

me to maybe install plumbing that's going to be a lot weaker than the sewer system in the streets so that the first time the new customers flush the toilets, everything backs up all over the bathroom floor — you want that, Joe?' 'No,' he says, 'I don't want that.' 'All right, then,' I say, 'you want me to maybe install plumbing that's a lot better than necessary, a lot stronger than the sewer system will require, and that'll add extra cost to the houses that doesn't have to be added — you want that, Joe?' 'No,' he says, 'I don't want that.' 'So, look, Joe,' I say, 'you're willing to admit this is a dumb proposition from top to bottom? Suppose someone asked you to build a house, Joe, and couldn't tell you whether the foundation under it is concrete or steel or sand or cinder-block. That's just exactly what you're asking me to do, Joe, that's just exactly what.'"

There was a rustle of approbation. A tall, weedy, mournful-looking Musketeer blew his nose and carefully replaced the handkerchief in his doublet before commenting: "That's the trouble with everybody. They think plumbers are miracle men. They got to learn that plumbers are only human."

"I don't know about that," said a stout Huguenot who had come up in the last few moments. "I take the attitude that plumbers are miracle men. What we got to

use is our American imagination, our American know-how, our American thinking straight to the point. You show me a sewer system in a new community that hasn't been installed yet, that nobody knows what its capacity is going to be, and I'll figure out a plumbing system for the development that'll fit it no matter what. And I'll save on cost, too."

"How?" demanded the sallow, undersized Musketeer. "*Tell me how.*"

"I'll tell you how," retorted the Huguenot. "By using my American imagination, my American know-how, my American thinking straight to the point. *That's* how."

"Pardon me," Alfred Smith broke in hurriedly as he saw the sallow, undersized Musketeer take a deep breath in preparation for a stinging rebuttal. "Do any of you gentlemen know of any prizes that will be given for the best costume, any door prizes, anything like that?"

SILENCE closed in as they all chewed their cigars at him appraisingly. Then the Huguenot (Coligny? Condé? de Rohan?) leaned forward and tapped him on the chest. "When you got a question, sonny, the thing to do is find the right man to ask the question of. That's half the battle. Now who's the right man to ask questions about door prizes? The

doorman. You go out to the doorman — he's wearing a General Montcalm — and you tell him Larry sent you. You tell him Larry said he should tell you all about door prizes, and, sonny, he'll tell you just what you want to know." He turned back to his smoldering adversary. "Now before you say anything, I know just what you're going to say. And I'll tell you why you're wrong."

Alfred squeezed his way out of the mobful of rising tempers. At the outskirts, a Cardinal's Guard who had just come up remarked broodingly to a black-hooded executioner: "That Larry. *Big* man! What I wouldn't give to be around when he takes a pratfall."

The executioner nodded and transferred his axe thoughtfully to the other shoulder. The rubber blade bounced once and came to rest. "One day there'll be an anonymous phone call to the Board of Health about Larry and they'll send out an inspector who can't be bought off and that'll be that. Any guy who'll buy up junk pipe and chromium-plate it and then sell it to his friends as new stuff that he's overstocked in . . ."

"Don't know nothing about prizes," the doorman told Alfred, rocking his folding chair back and forth in front of the ballroom entrance. "Anything important, they don't tell me." He tilted his cocked hat forward over his eyes and

stared bitterly into space, as if reflecting that with just a little more advance information from Paris the day might indeed have gone quite differently on the Plains of Abraham. "Why'n't you ask around down in the bar? All the big wheels are down in the bar."

There must be a good many big wheels, Alfred reflected as he apologized his way through the crowded room downstairs. The hoop-skirts and rearing extravagant hair-dos, the knobby-kneed hose, swinging swords and powdered wigs jam-packed *The February Revolution Was the Only Real Revolution Bar & Grill* so that the half-dozen or so regular customers in shabby suits and worn windbreakers seemed to be the ones actually in costume, poverty-stricken, resentful anachronisms from the future who had stumbled somehow into imperial Versailles and the intrigue of the Tuileries.

At the bar, Bill Bushke, his iron mask wide open despite the sternest decrees of King and Cardinal, accepted dues money, dispensed opinions on the future of standpipes and stall showers to the mob in heavy brocade and shot silk around him, and periodically threw a handful of largesse to the bartender, a chunky, angry-looking man with a spade beard and a white apron, along with the injunction to "set 'em up again."

There was no way to get through to him, Alfred realized. He asked several times about "prizes," was ignored and gave up. He had to find a wheel of somewhat smaller diameter.

ATUG at the sleeve of his clerical gown. He stared down at the rather thinnish Mme. DuBarry sitting in the empty booth. She gave him a smile from underneath her black vizard.

"Drinkie?" she suggested. Then, seeing his blank look, she amplified: "Yousie and mesie. Just us twosie."

Alfred shook his head. "Nosie — I mean no, thank you. I — uh — some business. Maybe later."

He started to walk away and found that his sleeve failed to accompany him. Mme DuBarry continued to hold it between two fingers; she held it winsomely, delicately, archly, but the hold was absolutely unequivocal.

"Aw," she pouted. "Look at the whizzy-busy businessman. No time for drinkie, no time for mesie, just busy, busy, busy, all the livelong day."

Despite his irritation, Alfred shrugged. He wasn't doing himself much good any other way. He came back and sat across the table from her in the booth. Then, and only then, was his sleeve released by the dainty fingers.

The angry-looking man in the

spade beard and white apron appeared at their booth. "Nye^hh?" he grunted, meaning, quite obviously, "What'll you have?"

"I'll have scotch on the rocks," she told Alfred. "Scotch on the rocks is absolutely the only ever drink for me."

"Two scotch on the rocks," Alfred told the bartender, who replied, "Nye^hh," signifying, "You order the stuff, I bring it. It's your funeral."

"I heard you asking about contests. I won a contest once. Does that make you like me a little better?"

"What kind of contest did you win?" Alfred asked absent-mindedly, studying her. Under that mask, she was probably somewhat pretty in a rather bony, highly ordinary sort of way. There was nothing here.

"I was voted The Girl the Junior Plumbers of Cleveland Would Most Like to Wipe a Joint With. It was supposed to be The Girl Whose Joint the Junior Plumbers Would Most Like to Wipe, but some nasty people made a fuss and the judges had to change the title. It was three years ago, but I still have the award certificate. Now does that help me at all?"

"I'm afraid not. But congratulations anyway on winning the title. It's not everybody who can win an honor like that."

THE angry-looking man in the spade beard came back and set glasses and coasters in front of them. "Nyehh!" he announced, meaning, "You pay me now. That's the way we do business in this place." He took the money, glowered at it, at them, and clumped back to the becustomered bar.

"Well, what kind of contest are you looking for? If you tell me, I might be able to help. I know lots of little things about lots and lots of little things."

"Oh, contests, prizes, nothing particular." Alfred glanced at the rear of the booth. There was a framed photograph on the wall of Plekhanov shaking hands with Kerensky. A much younger version of the chunky, angry-looking man in the spade beard was standing on tiptoe behind Plekhanov, straining hard to get his face into the picture. Alfred realized he was wasting time and swallowed his drink unceremoniously. "I'll have to be going."

She cooed dismay. "So soon? When we've just met? And when I like you so much?"

"What do you mean you like me so much?" he asked her irritably. "When, to quote you, we've just met?"

"But I do like you, I *do*. You're the cream in my coffee. You're the top. You do things to me. You're what makes the world go round. I'm nuts about you. I go

for you in a big way, big boy. I'm wild, simply wild over you. I'd climb the highest mountain, swim the deepest river. Body and soul. Roses are red, violets are blue. Drink to me only with thine eyes. Oh, Johnny, oh-h-h! You're in my heart and my heart's on my sleeve." She stopped and drew breath.

"Gah!" Alfred commented, his eyes almost popping. He started to get up. "Thanks, lady, for the pretty talk, but —"

Then he sat down again, his eyes reverting to their previous, poplike state. The way she'd expressed herself when she'd wanted to make certain she was understood! Like Jane Doe, like Mr. Jones.

He'd established rendezvous!

"So that's how much you like me?" he queried, fighting for time, trying to think out his next step.

"Oh, yes!" she assured him. "I'm carrying the torch, all right. I idolize you. I fancy you. I dote on you. I hold dear, make much of, cherish, prize, cling to —"

"Good!" he almost yelled in the desperation of his attempt to break in on the language of love. "Good-good, good-good. Now I'd like to go some place where we can have some privacy and discuss your feelings in more detail." He worked his face for a moment or two, composing it into an enormous leer. "My hotel room, say, or your apartment?"

Mme DuBarry nodded enthusiastically. "My apartment. It's right near by."

AS she tripped out of the bar beside him, Alfred had to keep reminding himself that this was no human wench, despite the tremulous pressure of her arm around his or the affectionate bump of her hip. This was an intelligent spider operating machinery, no more, no less. But it was also his first key to the puzzle of what the aliens wanted on Earth, his entry into the larger spy organization — and, if he kept his head and enjoyed just a bit of luck, it might well be the means to the saving of his world.

A cab rolled up. They got in, and she called out an address to the driver. Then she turned to Alfred.

"Let's kiss passionately," she said.

They kissed passionately.

"Now let's snuggle," she said.

They snuggled.

"Now let's snuggle a lot harder," she said.

They snuggled a lot harder.

"That's enough," she said. "For now."

They stopped in front of a large, old apartment house that dozed fitfully high above the street, dreaming of its past as it stared down at a flock of rundown brownstones.

Alfred paid the driver and accompanied Mme DuBarry to the entrance. As he held the elevator door open for her, she batted her eyes at him excitedly and breathed fast in his ear a couple of times.

In the elevator, she pressed the button marked "B."

"Why the basement?" he asked. "Is your apartment in the basement?"

For answer, she pointed a tiny red cylinder at his stomach. He noticed there was a minute catch on top of the cylinder. Her thumb was poised over the catch.

"Never you mind what's in the basement, you lousy Vaklittian sneak. You just stand very still and do exactly what I tell you. And for your information, I know where you are and where your control cubicle is, so don't entertain any hopes of getting away with nothing more than a damaged uniform."

Alfred glanced down at the region covered by her weapon and swallowed hard. She was wrong about the location of his control cubicle, of course, but still, face it, how much living would he be able to do without a belly?

"Don't worry," he begged her. "I won't do anything foolish."

"You'd better not. And no *phmpffs* out of you either, if you know what's good for you. One solitary *phmpff* and I fill you full of holes. I ventilate you, mister.

I plug you where you stand. I let daylight through you. I spray your — ”

“I get the idea,” Alfred broke in. “No *phmpffs*. Absolutely. I give you my word of honor.”

“Your word of honor!” she sneered.

THE elevator stopped and she backed out, gesturing him to follow. He stared at her masked face and resplendent costume, remembering that when duBarry had been dragged to the guillotine in 1793, she had screamed to the crowds about her tumbril: “Mercy! Mercy for repentance!” Neither the crowds nor the Revolutionary Tribunal had taken her up on the honest offer. Was that a good or a bad omen for him?

Not exactly to Alfred’s surprise, there was a man waiting for them in the clammy, whitewashed basement. The Huguenot. He of the American thinking straight-to-the-point.

“Any trouble?”

“No, it was easy,” she told him. “I pulled him in with the Cleveland-contest-three-years-ago routine. He was smooth about it, I’ll say that for him: pretended not to be interested, you know, but he must have bitten hard. I found that out a few seconds later when I told him I loved him and he asked me right off to come up to his apartment.” She chuckled. “The

poor, pathetic incompetent! As if any normal American human male would react like that — without so much as a remark about my beautiful eyes and how different I am and how about another drink, baby.”

The Huguenot pulled at his lip dubiously. “And yet the uniform-disguise is a fine one,” he pointed out. “That shows a high degree of competence.”

“So what?” The woman shrugged. “He can design a good uniform, he can think up a splendid disguise, but what good is that if he’s slipshod about his *performance*? This one’s barely learned anything about human methods and human manners. Even if I hadn’t known about him before, I’d have spotted him on the basis of his love-making in the cab.”

“Bad, eh?”

“*Bad?*” She rolled her eyes for maximum emphasis. “Oh, brother! I pity him if he ever pulled that clumsy counterfeit on a real human female. Bad isn’t the word. A cheap fake. A second-rate ad-lib, but from hunger. No conviction, no feeling of reality, nothing!”

Alfred glared at her through the wide-open wounds of his ego. There were holes in *her* performance, he thought savagely, that would have closed any show the first night. But he decided against giving this critical appraisal aloud. After all, she had the weapon — and he had

no idea how ugly a mess that little red cylinder might make.

"All right," said the Huguenot, "let's put him in with the other one."

With the red cylinder prodding into his backbone, Alfred marched up the main basement corridor, turned right at their command, turned right again and halted before a blank wall. The Huguenot came up beside him and rubbed his hand across the surface several times. A part of the wall swung open as on hinges, and they stepped inside.

SECRET panels yet, Alfred was thinking morosely. Secret panels, a female siren, a Huguenot mastermind — all the equipment. The only thing that was missing was a reason for the whole damn business. His captors had not discovered that he was a human counter-spy, or they would have destroyed him out of hand. They thought he was a — what was it? — a Vaklittian. A Vaklittian sneak, no less.

So there were two sets of spies — the Huguenot had said something about putting him in with the other one.

But what were these two sets of spies after? Were they both grappling for pre-invasion control of Earth? That would make his mission much more complicated. To say nothing about trying to tell

the police, if he ever managed to get to the police, about two inter-planetary invasions!

And look who'd thought *he* was the counter-spy in the picture . . .

The room was large and windowless. It was almost empty. In one corner, there was a transparent cube about eight feet on each side. A middle-aged man in a single-breasted brown business suit sat on the floor of the cube watching them curiously and a little hopelessly.

The Huguenot paused as he reached the cube. "You've searched him, of course?"

Mme. du Barry got flustered. "Well — no, not exactly. I *intended* to, but you were waiting when we got out of the elevator — I hadn't expected you for a while yet, you know — and then we got into conversation and I just didn't — "

Her superior shook his head angrily. "You talk about competence! Oh, well, if I want anything done right, I just have to do it myself!"

He ran his hands over Alfred. He took out Alfred's fountain pen and cigarette lighter and examined them very closely. Then he replaced them and looked puzzled. "He's not carrying a weapon. Does that make sense?"

"It certainly does! I wouldn't put anything dangerous in the hands of anyone so ridiculously inexperienced!"

The Huguenot thought about it for a while. "No. He wouldn't be running around by himself then. He'd be under supervision."

"Maybe he is. Maybe that's the answer. In that case —"

"In that case, you both might have been followed here. Yes, that could be it. Well, we'll fool them. Contact or no contact, we'll close the operation here as of tonight. Don't go out again — in an hour or so, we'll leave the planet and take off with our prisoners for Headquarters."

He rubbed his hand against the cube as he had on the wall outside. An opening appeared in the transparency and widened rapidly. With the cylinder at his back, Alfred was pushed inside.

"Give him a small blast," he heard the Huguenot whisper. "Not too much — I don't want him killed before he's questioned. Just enough to stun him and keep him from talking to the other one."

There was a tiny click behind Alfred. A rosy glow lit up the cube and the basement room. He felt a bubble of gas form in his belly and rise upward slowly. After a while, he belched.

WHEN he turned around, the opening in the transparency had closed and the Huguenot had whirled angrily on Mme. du Barry. The lady was examining her weapon with great puzzlement.

"I told you I wanted him stunned, not tickled! Is there *anything* I can depend on you to do right?"

"I was trying to be careful — I didn't want to kill him, like you said! I aimed right at the control cubicle and I used the medium-low Vaklittian index. I don't understand how he — how he —"

The Huguenot flapped both hands at her disgustedly. "Oh, let's get out of here and start packing! When we get back tonight, I intend to ask Headquarters to assign me a new female assistant for the next Earth operation. One without so exact a knowledge of human males, perhaps, but who can be counted on to disarm a newly captured prisoner and to tell a Vaklittian index from a hole in her cylinder!"

Mme. du Barry hung her head and followed him out of the room. The door-wall shut behind them.

Alfred touched the transparent wall of the cube gingerly. There was no longer any hint of the opening he had been pushed through. The stuff, while as transparent as glass, was rubbery and slightly sticky, something like newly melted plastic. But a plastic, he found out, incredibly strong. And it gave off a whitish glow which enabled him to see through it, dimly, the featureless walls of the secret basement room.

He turned and surveyed his co-

prisoner, a few feet away, on the other side of the cube.

The man was looking at him suspiciously and yet uncertainly, as if he did not quite know what to make of the situation. There was a peculiarly nondescript, uninteresting and ordinary quality to his features which made them somehow extraordinarily familiar.

Of course! He looked every bit as average as Jones, as Cohen, as Kelly and — in her own submerged feminine way — as Jane Doe. And then, with complete certainty, Alfred knew who the man had to be.

"John Smith?" he inquired. "I mean," he added, as he recollected one of Jones' earlier remarks, "Gar-Pitha?"

The middle-aged man rose to his feet and smiled relief. "I couldn't figure out who you were, but you had to be one of us. Unless you were a decoy they were planting here to make me talk. But if you know my real name. . . . What's yours, by the way?"

Alfred shook his head coyly. "Command Central — Robinson, I mean — has me on a special mission. I'm not allowed to give my name."

John Smith nodded heavily. "Then you don't give it — and that's that. Robinson knows what he's doing. You can't go wrong by following Robinson's orders to the letter. Special mission, eh?"

Well, you won't complete it — now. She trapped me the same way. We're both in the soup and good."

"The soup?"

"Sure. Those filthy Lidsgallians — you heard them? They're leaving tonight and taking us with them. Once they've got us on their home planet, they'll be able to work us over at their leisure. They won't get anything out of me, and I hope, for the honor of the Academy, they won't get anything out of you, no matter *what* they do to us, but we won't be good for very much by the time they're through. Oh, those Lidsgallians know their way around a torture chamber, yessiree, Bob!"

"Torture chamber?" Alfred felt sick and knew he looked it.

THE older man reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Steady on, lad," he said. "Don't show the white feather before the natives. Keep a stiff upper lip. Bite the bullet. Fight on for Notre Dame. Never say die. You have nothing to lose but your chains. Let's keep the old flag flying."

As Alfred said nothing, John Smith took his silence for agreement with these high principles and went on: "You can't get out of this cell — it's a spun web of pure *chrok*, practically unbreakable. But the worst of it is its insulating quality: you can't *phmpff* through

chrok to save your life. I've tried to *phmpff* for help until I almost fractured an antenna — couldn't raise a whisper. That's why they don't have to split up their force to guard us. And that's why I haven't bothered to come out of my uniform to talk to you: if we can't *phmpff*, we'll make more sense to each other with the jaw attachments of our uniforms."

Grateful for this small mercy, Alfred began to look around at the enclosing walls of *chrok*. "How about using these — these jaw attachments to get help?" he suggested. "Sound seems to go through. We could try yelling together."

"And who would hear you? Humans. What could *they* do?"

Alfred spread his hands. "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes even humans can be — "

"No, forget about it. Things are bad, but they're not *that* bad. Besides, these walls are especially thick and there are no cracks in them. If those Lidsgallians hadn't come down a couple of times a day to change the air, I'd have suffocated by now. As it was, I was in a bad way a couple of times and had to fall back on the reserve air supply in the chest — you know, the compartment right over the control cubicle? But I'll tell you this, if I ever get back to Vaklitt in one piece, I'll really try to talk Command Central into

drastically revising our uniform.

"I thought of it while I was watching them search you. Do away with the air reserve in the chest, I'll tell Robinson — how often, when you come right down to it, does one of our Special Emissaries ever find himself drowning or in the middle of a poison-gas war? — and find some way an agent can take a weapon, a real, honest, claw-operated weapon, into his uniform-disguise with him. Although, come to think of it, you'd need some sort of turret arrangement coming out of the human flesh to fire it, and those Lidsgallians, once they found out about it, would — "

He rambled on. Alfred, watching him, realized how hungry he'd been for companionship. And this talkative mood might be put to use. They both might be in a Lidsgallian torture chamber somewhere out in the Galaxy in a couple of hours, but there was a very slender chance that they might not. And, besides, facts were always useful; he could cope with whatever lay ahead a bit more easily if he only had some coherent facts on which to base his plans. This was the time, if ever, to find out who was the greater menace to Earth, the Vaklittians or the Lidsgallians — and who was more likely to accept the proffer of friendship from a badly frightened human.

Only — he had to be careful how he phrased the questions. He had to be prepared to cover up any blunders quickly.

“WHY do you think,” he asked carelessly, “the Lidsgallians hate us so much? Oh, I know the usual answers, but I’m interested in hearing *your* opinion. You seem to have a very refreshing slant.”

John Smith grunted appreciatively, thought for a moment, then shrugged. “The usual answers are the only answers in this case. It’s the war. Naturally.”

“Just the war? That’s all, you think?”

“*Just* the war? What do you mean, *just* the war? How can an interstellar war, going on across two-thirds of the Galaxy for almost three centuries, be *just* the war? Trillions upon trillions of individuals killed, dozens upon dozens of fertile planets smashed into space dust — you call that *just* the war? You youngsters must really be growing up pretty cynical these days!”

“I — I didn’t mean it quite like that,” Alfred said rapidly, placatingly. “Of course, the war — it’s a terrible business and all that. Awful. Positively horrible. Sickening, sickening. And our enemy, those vicious Lidsgallians — ”

John Smith looked sandbagged. “What? The Lidsgallians aren’t

our enemies — they’re our *allies*!”

It was Alfred’s turn under the sandbag. “Our *allies*?” he repeated weakly, wondering how he was ever going to get out of this one. “Our *allies*?” he said again, trying a different intonation on for size and the bare possibility of sense.

“I don’t know what the Academy’s coming to any more,” John Smith muttered to himself. “In my day, you got a good general education there, with just enough lab work in espionage to warrant giving you a commission in the Service if you filled all the other requirements. You came out of the Academy a wide-awake, cultured interstellar citizen, with a good background in history, economics, art, science and total terroristic warfare. On top of that, you had, whenever you wanted to use it, a decent and honorable trade — spying — under your belt.

“Of course, if you wanted to specialize, you could always go back, after graduation, for intensive study in elementary and advanced ciphers, creative disguise design, plain and fancy lying, physical and mental torture, narrow fields of scholarship like that. But that used to be strictly post-graduate work.

“Now — now everything is specialization. They turn out dewy youngsters who can crack any code in space, but can’t tell a simple espionage lie to save their heads;

they graduate kids who can knock out a masterpiece of a uniform-disguise, but don't even know the difference between a Lidsgallian and a Pharseddic! Mark my words, this overspecialization will be the death of the Academy yet!"

"I agree with you," Alfred told him with ringing sincerity. He thought for a moment and decided to underline his endorsement. "Shoemaker, stick to your last. A place for everything and everything in its place. Spare the rod and spoil the child. Look to the ant, thou sluggard!"

He found he was going off the track and stopped himself. "But you see, the way the Academy feels today, its graduates will go into active service and meet older, more experienced men like yourself who can give them this general political orientation right on the spot. Now, in a way, I really knew all the time that the actual enemy, in the deeper sense of the word, so to speak, were the Pharseddics, but — "

"The Pharseddics? Our enemy? But the Pharseddics are the neutrals — the *only* neutrals! Look here, youngster, and try to get it straight in your mind for once. You absolutely can't do a first-class job of espionage on Earth unless you know the general principles and the background data from which they're derived. To begin with, the Lidsgallians were at-

tacked — *with* provocation — by the Garoonish, right?"

ALFRED assented with a positive shake off his head. "Right! Any schoolchild knows that."

"All right, then. We had to go to war with the Garoonish, not because we had anything particular against them, or liked the Lidsgallians, but because if the Garoonish won, they would then be in a position to conquer the Mairunians, who were our only possible allies against the growing power of the Ishpolians."

"Naturally," Alfred murmured. "Under the circumstances, there was no alternative."

"Well, that forced the Garoonish to make common cause with the Ossfollians. The Ossfollians activated their mutual assistance pact with the Kenziash of the Nigel region, and, out of fear of the Kenziash, the Ishpolians joined forces with us and pushed the Mairunians into the Garoonish camp. Then came the Battle of the Ninth Sector in which the Ossfollians switched sides four times and which resulted in the involvement of the Menyemians, the Kazkafians, the Doksads, and even the Kenziash of the Procyon and Canopus regions. After that, of course, the war began to get complicated."

Alfred wet his lips. "Yes, of course. Began to get complicated." He decided, for the sake of sanity,

to bring matters much closer to present time and place. "Meanwhile, here on Earth, there are the spies of — the spies of — Pardon me, but in your opinion just how many of these belligerents operate espionage networks on Earth? Regularly, I mean."

"All of them! Every single one of them! Including the Pharsedics, who have to know what's going on if they're to maintain their neutrality. Earth, as I hope you remember from your first-year course in Elementary Secrecy, is ideally situated just outside the usual battle zones, but within easy access of almost all the belligerents. It's the only place left where information can be transmitted across the combat lines and deals can be made back and forth — and, as such, it's zealously respected by everyone.

"After all, it was on Earth that we sold out the Doksads, and where the annihilation of the Menyemians was arranged by their allies, the Mairunians and the Kazkafians. Just as now we have to watch our own oldest allies, the Lidsgallians, who have been trying to make contact with Garoonish for the purpose of *concluding a separate peace!*

"I got the proof — I even found out the specific time and place the contact was to be made and what the arrangements were to be! But then I ran afoul of that

female with her yacker of Cleveland contests she won three years ago. And I got caught."

"The contact was to be made through a beauty contest of some sort, wasn't it?"

THE middle-aged man looked impatient. "Naturally a beauty contest. Of course a beauty contest. How else would anyone go about contacting the Garoonish?"

"I couldn't imagine," Alfred laughed weakly. "The *Garoonish*, after all!" He sat in silence, absolutely unable to close mentally with the picture John Smith had evoked. The nearest he could come to it was a memory of something he had read about Lisbon during the Second World War. But this was Lisbon cubed, Lisbon raised to some incredible exponential power. All Earth was a vast labyrinth of spy-threaded Lisbon. Spies, counter-spies, counter-counter spies . . .

Just what, he suddenly wondered, was the correct human population of Earth? Were there so many disguised interstellar agents that they outnumbered the host race? Would the world census show the truth — more humans if the agents hadn't been counted, less if they had?

Life had been a lot simpler with Puzzleknit Nylons, he decided, and that was his only real conclusion.

John Smith nudged him. "Here they come. It's off to Lidsgall for us."

They rose to their feet as the wall opened. Two men and a woman came in, dressed in street clothing. They each carried in one hand a small suitcase that looked heavy, and, in the other, the small, red cylindrical weapon.

Alfred eyed the cylinders and found himself getting tense with a dangerous idea. The weapon hadn't bothered him much before and it had supposedly been set to stun him. Well, perhaps the woman had a mistake in her setting — and perhaps the metabolisms of Man and Vaklittian were so different that a charge that would knock out the one would merely give the other only an upset stomach.

Then again, if Earth were so carefully maintained in her ignorance as John Smith had indicated, there might be no setting on the weapon that would damage a native terrestrial at all: in the normal course of their intrigues with and against and around each other, these people might be enjoined by their own laws and by mutual agreement from carrying weapons that could damage humans.

But if he were wrong? It still might take them quite a bit of time to realize that the Vaklittian frequencies were having no important effect on him, and he might manage a lot of action in that

time. The alternative, at any rate, was to be snatched from Earth in just a few minutes and deposited, some time in the near future, in an extraterrestrial torture chamber. Even if he were able to prove his humanity to their satisfaction, they would have to dispose of him in some way — and the various devices of the torture chamber would be so handy.

No question about it: people who go in for torture chambers do not make good hosts.

ONE of the men fiddled with his suitcase, and the transparent cube dissolved around Alfred and John Smith. In response to the gestures made with the weapons, they walked gingerly across the floor. They were motioned through the open wall.

Alfred found it difficult to recognize Mme. du Barry and the Huguenot without their masks and costumes. They both looked much like the new man with them, not bad, not good, just faces-in-a-crowd. Which, of course, was exactly how they wanted it.

He reached his decision as the five of them began walking through the opening in the wall. For the moment, they were closely bunched together, even bumping against each other.

He grabbed the woman by the arm and swung her violently against the Huguenot, who stag-

gered confusedly. Then, knowing that John Smith was between him and the new man in the rear, he hitched up his cassock and started to run. He turned left, and again left — and found himself in the main basement corridor. Ahead, at the far end, was a flight of stone stairs leading up to the street.

Behind him, there was the noise of struggle, then the sound of feet running in pursuit. He heard John Smith distantly yell: "Go it, lad-die! Over the hill! Ride him, cowboy! It's the last lap — full speed ahead! Shake a leg! Hit the road! Go, man, go!" Then the Valklittian's shout abruptly ended in a breathless grunt. After the sound of a wallop.

A pinkish glow hit Alfred, moved back and over to light up his mid-section. He belched. The glow turned light red, deep red, dark, vicious red. He belched more frequently. He reached the stairs and was clambering up them as the glow became a throbbing, nightlike purple.

Ten minutes later, he was on Sixth Avenue, getting into a cab. He had a mildly unpleasant belly-ache. It rapidly subsided.

He looked behind him as they drove to his hotel. No pursuit. Good. The Lidsgallians would have no idea where he lived.

Did they look like the Viklattian spiders? Hardly, he decided.

All these different racial names and these titanic interstellar animosities suggested many, many separate forms. They'd have to be small enough to fit into a normal human body, though. Snaillike creatures, possibly, and wormlike ones. Crablike ones and squidlike ones. Perhaps even ratlike ones?

On the whole, a dreadfully unpleasant subject. He needed a good night's sleep, for tomorrow would be his first day at BlakSemes'. And then, after a bit, when he'd had a chance to think it all out, he'd decide what to do. The police, the F.B.I., or whatever. Maybe even take the whole story to one of the New York newspapers — or some top television commentator might be more sympathetic and reach a bigger audience.

His story would have to be coherent and convincing, though. He'd have little proof: the Lidsgallians were probably on their way back to their home planet this very moment.

But there was his own gang — the Vaklittians. Cohen and Kelly and Jones. And Jane Doe. He'd kid them along for a couple of days and then use them for proof.

It was time Earth knew what was going on.

HIS own gang was waiting for him in his hotel room. Cohen and Kelly and Jones. And Jane Doe. They looked as if they'd

been waiting for a long time. Jane Doe looked as if she'd been crying. Mr. Kelly was sitting on the bed with his open briefcase on his knees. The eye on the telescopic rod swiveled as Alfred came in.

"So there you are," said Robinson's voice from the briefcase. "I hope you have an explanation, Smith. I only hope you have an explanation."

"For what?" Alfred asked irritably. He'd been looking forward to getting out of his costume, taking a hot shower, and then bed. This late performance of "I spy" was very annoying. Repetitious, too.

"For what?" Robinson roared. "For *what*? Kelly, tell him for what!"

"Look here, Smith," Kelly demanded. "Did you or didn't you ask the desk clerk to find out about a plumbers' fancy dress ball?"

"I did. Of course, I did. He got all the information I needed."

There was a howl from the briefcase. "*He got all the information I needed!* Six years of general studies in espionage at the Academy, a year of post-graduate work in Intensive Secrecy, six months at the Special Service School in Data-Sifting and Location-Tracing — and you have the nerve to stand there with your carapace in your claws and tell me that the only way of tracking

down this fancy dress ball you could think of was to ask the desk clerk — an ordinary, everyday human desk clerk — to find out about it for you!"

Alfred noticed that the faces around him were all extremely grave. Despite his weariness and strong feelings of indifference, he made an effort to conciliate. "Well, if he was only an ordinary, everyday human, I fail to see the harm that — "

"He could have been the Ga-roonish Minister of War, for all you knew!" the briefcase blasted. "Not that it made any difference. By the time he'd questioned his various sources and mentioned the matter to his various friends, acquaintances and business associates, every spy organization in the Galaxy had been alerted. They knew what we were worrying about, what we were looking for, and where and when we hoped to find it. You accomplished one of the best jobs of interstellar communication ever. Sixty-five years of patient espionage planning gone down the drain. Now what have you to say for yourself?"

Alfred stood up straight and manfully pulled back his shoulders. "Just this. I'm sorry." He considered for a moment, then added: "Deeply and truly sorry."

Some kind of storm seemed to explode in the briefcase. It almost rolled off Kelly's knees.





"I just can't stand this any more," Jane Doe said suddenly. "I'll wait outside." She walked past Alfred to the door, her eyes swimming in reproachfulness. "Darling, darling, how *could* you?" she whispered bitterly.

THE briefcase crackled down to some semblance of control. "I'll give you one last chance, Smith. Not that I think any conceivable defense you might have would be valid, but I hate to demote a Special Emissary, to push him forever out of the Service, without giving him every chance to be heard. So. Is there any defense you wish to have registered before sentence of demotion is passed upon you?"

Alfred considered. This was evidently a serious business in their eyes, but it was beginning to be slightly meaningless to him. There was too much of it and it was too complicated. He was tired. *And* he was Alfred Smith, not John Smith.

He could tell them about the events of the night, about the Lidsgallians and the information he'd received from the captive Smith. It might be valuable and it might throw a weight in the scales in his favor. The trouble was that then the question of John Smith's real identity would arise — and that might become very embarrassing.

Besides, he was over the fear he'd felt earlier about these creatures: they could do little more to him than a dose of sodium bicarbonate, he'd found out. Their super-weapons were to be discounted, at least on Earth. And when it came to that point, he was not all all sure that he wanted to give them helpful information. Who knew just where Earth's best interests lay?

He shook his head, feeling the fatigue in his neck muscles. "No defense. I *said* I'm sorry."

From the briefcase, Robinson sighed. "Smith, this hurts me more than it hurts you. It's the principle of the thing, you see. The punishment fit the crime. More in sorrow than in anger. You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs. All right, Kelly. The sentence."

Kelly put the briefcase on the bed and got to his feet. Cohen and Jones came to attention. There was evidently to be a ceremony.

"By virtue of the authority vested in me as acting chief of this field group," Kelly intoned, "and pursuant to Operating Procedure Regulations XCVII, XCVIII and XCIX, I hereby demote and degrade you, Gar-Pitha of Vaklitt, from the rank of Special Emissary, Second Class, to the rank of General Emissary or such other lower rank as Command Central may find fitting and necessary in the best interests of the Service.

"I further direct that your disgrace be published throughout every arm and echelon of the Service and that your name be stricken from the roster of graduates of the Academy which you have shamed. And, finally, in the name of this field group and every individual within it, I disown you now and forevermore as a colleague and a comrade in arms and a friend."

It was, Alfred decided, a kind of strong-medicine ritual. Must be pretty affecting to someone who was involved in it personally.

Then, from either side, Cohen and Jones moved in swiftly to complete the last, dramatic part of the ceremony. They were very formal, but very thorough, as they stripped the culprit of his uniform.

— WILLIAM TENN



FORECAST

After a racing start in this issue, Robert Sheckley's swift, sleek, enormously suspenseful and inventive *TIME KILLER* smashes through the fictional light barrier in the tradition of *Galaxy's* truly great serials, with each installment a cargo hold packed with glitteringly new ideas and backgrounds never before offered for sale and enough Most Unforgettable Characters to fill issues of the *Reader's Digest* for years to come — all bound into as twisty and taut a plot as ever appeared in print. Readers who scan synopses in the belief that these are all one needs to know of a serial (and we were appalled to learn there actually are such self-cheaters) will get no more out of them than this slender teaser: Keeping his head is the least of Blaine's worries in this deadliest of skin games . . . which is aimed to fleece him of his borrowed body!

For those, however, who save installments to be read all at once, there is fun aplenty in the waiting period with:

THE CIVILIZATION GAME by Clifford D. Simak — the ones who went to the stars are in no danger; it's those who stay behind to guard Man's heritage that challenge deadly unknown perils!

BIRDS OF A FEATHER by Robert Silverberg — getting specimens for the interstellar zoo is no problem. They battle for the honor. But here is a zoo collector who has to fight like a wildcat to keep a display from making a monkey of him!

Plus short stories and Willy Ley's report on *THE FIRST SPACESHIP* and our regular features. Quite an issue. Watch for it.



GALAXY'S **5 Star Shelf**

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS by
John Wyndham. Ballantine Books,
N. Y., \$3.50

CITY dwellers may not know that cuckoos lay their eggs in alien nests for their brood to be raised by the unsuspecting foster-mothers as their own. Wyndham employs this sneaky stratagem as the basis for a most off-trail and well-written invasion yarn.

The tired town of Midwich, England, is the beachhead. An unknown, inexplicable and traceless visitation anesthetizes the town's entire population for one

day. Weeks later, every able female is obviously pregnant, regardless of marital status. Since there is no clue whatever to the nature or identity of the marauders, the Armed Forces can take no action other than a complete news blackout. Due to the delicate nature of the affliction, little word-of-mouth information leaves the environs, anyhow.

Seemingly, the only governmental interest in the affair is the strictly unofficial appointment of a young local couple by an Army colonel as informants and pulse-takers. To them, their

role is "As intriguing as the idea of an Obstetrics Division of Military Intelligence."

Eventually the women give birth. Their infants are golden-eyed, almost identical, and equally divided as to sex. In addition, they possess an unholy power of compulsion.

Wyndham does, too, as the reader discovers after being swept along to the conclusion. In the enjoyable confusion and suspense, a couple of key questions go unanswered. The book has been sold to Hollywood. Let's hope they don't come up with their usual godawful stock answers.

ROBOTS AND CHANGELINGS by *Lester del Rey*. *Balantine Books*, N. Y., \$2.00

DEL Rey has a soft spot in his heart for the unhuman, and who can deny him the right? As one of the elders among SF authors, he was influential in the formative thirties in humanizing the story form as well. Remember "Helen O'Loy"?

A couple of the eleven short stories date back two decades, most of the remainder only a handful of years, but all have the stamp of his compassion, whether for a fallen god in "The Pipes of Pan," an unemployed elf in "The Coppersmith" or a pair of sexed robots of "Into Thy Hands." "No

Strings Attached," a horrible little yarn, and "Stability," an inverted rework of the theme of Campbell's "Who Goes There?" rescue the volume from sentimentality.

THE STARS by *W. Kruse and W. Dieckvoss*. *U. of Michigan Press*, Ann Arbor, \$5.00

THE Palomar giant is actually discovering new island universes at a fantastic pace, whereas it only appears that books on astronomy are appearing at an equal rate. In any case, the immensity of the subject leaves room and to spare for all volumes published and forthcoming.

The Hamburg Observatory's Drs. Kruse and Dieckvoss have collaborated on an exceedingly intelligently programmed text for the curious. They have started with a quick, easy explanation of optical principles and applications to show how we seek, where we seek, what we find and how we can analyze our results.

Lastly, they show how, as a result of the arduous labors of many specialists, a few great intellects can correlate the masses of information into theories and explanations of the nature of the Universe.

THE SHROUDED PLANET by *Robert Randall*. *Gnome Press*, N.Y., \$3.00

SILVERBERG and Garrett, Robert and Randall respectively, claim that future Earth, thoroughly civilized, with internal conflict abolished and no competitors among the stars, must generate conflict to escape stagnation.

Unfortunately, the closest thing to a rival is Nidor, a backward humanoid theocracy steeped in peace and Scripture. An Earth-sponsored theological seminary is to do the trick by gradual psychological alteration. Several generations are chronicled, each resulting in more independence of thought and dissatisfaction with rule by the Council of Elders.

SF is full of stories of the uplifting of backward cultures by the Good Earth, but few depict her as the sponsor of a heartless program that replaces happiness with its pursuit. An *essential* program, possibly though arguably, but is it *necessary*?

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SKY by Arthur C. Clarke. Harcourt, Brace & Co., N.Y., \$3.95

WITH this fourth collection of Clarke's short stories, the author himself is satisfied that all worthy of reprinting are now anthologized. So am I, particularly since, for lack of alternates, too many of his O. Henryish crack-of-doom startlers had to be used. This is no slam: Clarke bows to

no one's trick ending. But too many are more than enough.

However, there are several superlative items. A brilliant series of short-shorts first seen in the London *Evening Standard* under "The Other Side of the Sky" and "Venture to the Moon" headings, each six shorts long, alone are guidebook material to show what a master can do with fifteen hundred words.

ONLY A TRILLION by Isaac Asimov. Abelard-Schuman, N.Y., \$3.50

SOMEONE recently said that Isaac lives funny but writes serious. If that's true, here is the rule-proving exception. Almost certainly he had enormous fun writing this collection of articles. He staggers, frightens, amazes and, in two, fiendishly misleads his reader.

The title conveys the spirit of the book precisely. Asimov goes far beyond mere figures to immeasurables and imponderables. He rocks one with the frightening fact that 38,000 atoms of potassium-40 are exploding in your body — *each second*! He expresses a number utterly beyond comprehension as the mathematical expression of the chances against nature coming up with just the right combination of amino-acids to form hemoglobin. He treats

other subjects in equally brain-busting but enjoyable fashion.

As a bonus, his famous, utterly logical, utterly whacky "The Marvellous Properties of Thiotimoline" and Paté de Foie Gras" are appended.

How much is a trillion? A trillion seconds ago, mastodons roamed North America!

OUT OF THIS WORLD by Murray Leinster. Avalon Books, N.Y., \$2.75

LEINSTER-JENKINS began his science fiction writing career back when most of his present audience was either unborn or just barely. His basic training was in the gadget school of SF, although perhaps no other author in the field has shown his adaptability. That he still loves to gadgeteer is demonstrated in last year's *Colonial Survey* and the present rampant spoof.

In the old days, our scientist hero would whip up an Earth-saver from his well-equipped lab, but Leinster's hillbilly works with just plain junk and, when finished, his super whatzit still looks like junk.

So does he, and he's a lazy slob besides. It takes a heap of doing for Leinster's narrator to prod him into activity against various foes and forces.

Leinster was cautious, staying

just this side of slapstick. Nevertheless, it emerges more heavy-handed than most of his lighter works.

THE BOOK OF POPULAR SCIENCE. The Grolier Society, Inc., N. Y., Toronto, \$89.95

ORDINARILY, an encyclopedic reference work does not fit into the scope of a column like this. But, since the Junior Education Corner's purpose is to supplement curricular deficiencies, this ten-volume set is just what the educator ordered.

It contains 2,000,000 words; 4,200 pages; 4,300 illustrations and 10,000 index entries.

The fifteen basic divisions ensure coverage of all the sciences: physical, theoretical, natural and human.

The list of contributors reads like a page of *Who's Who*: Willy Ley on Space Travel; Dr. Lee De Forest, the father of the triode; R. Marlin Perkins of TV's Zoo Parade fame; Dr. Willard Libby of the AEC, etc.

The set is large, attractive and eminently useful, and contains a bonus of a twenty-five-page bibliography of extra study for the serious student.

An outstanding reference library of the sciences for youngsters and fine for all adults except specialists.

—FLOYD C. GALE

By ROBERT BLOCH

Block That Metaphor

In dealing with Mechs, "Guard your tongue" was the worst advice — they would obligingly guard it for you!

Illustrated by MARTINEZ

IT was to be a formal affair—white shorts and tails—and Lane Borden wondered just how well Vorm would fit in.

The servants and *attachés* here at the Embassy were used to the presence of visiting extraterrestrials, but even they seemed disturbed by Vorm.

If he had been a mere robot, there wouldn't be any problem, but the idea of a sentient intelligence housed in a wholly synthetic

body was difficult to accept. The body itself was not repulsive; it was largely metallic, but humanoid in its general contours. There were some rather disturbing differences, though.

An engineer would probably grant the advantage of having six visual perceptors, or "eyes," situated equidistantly around the entire cranial compartment. Still, the knowledge that Vorm really had "eyes in the back of his head" and

could observe everything in a room *simultaneously* created an unnerving effect. Then, too, Vorm's "mouth" was just a speaking-tube, and as for his "nose"—

Lane Borden remembered what had happened earlier in the afternoon, when he'd conducted Vorm into his own apartments at the Embassy for a little informal chat. That was when Borden's fiancée had made an unexpected appearance.

Borden was justly proud of Margaret Zurich. She was a strikingly beautiful woman and an intergalactically famous pianist—one of the few who still excelled in the ancient art of non-electronic musicianship. Borden really envied her talent.

But when she abruptly entered the room where he sat with Vorm, he felt neither pride nor envy, merely a frantic fear.

"Excuse me a moment," he said, nodding to Vorm as he rose and crossed over to Margaret Zurich. Before she could object, he took her arm and led her out into the anteroom. Even so, he wasn't at all certain that he'd managed to act in time to prevent a crisis.

"DARLING, what's the matter?" Margaret asked. She stared at Borden's throat. "And what's that thing you're wearing around your neck?"

"It's a jammer," Borden told

her, opening a desk drawer and producing a duplicate of the contrivance. "Just take this one for yourself. Here, I'll show you how to put it on."

"But whatever for?"

"You've heard of jammers, haven't you?"

"Oh. Of course. I've just never seen one." She frowned. "You mean that creature in there is a telepath?"

"No, not in the ordinary sense. This instrument doesn't scramble thought patterns. You'll notice it's worn around the neck, at the larynx. It scrambles subvocalizations."

"The thoughts one put into words but doesn't speak aloud?"

"Close enough. The point is he has unusual hearing ability which extends to detecting subvocalizations. That's why we wear jammers — to scramble the unspoken sounds."

"But I don't—"

"Please, we'll discuss it later. I don't want to keep my guest waiting."

Throat masked, pulse obscured by electronic impulse, Margaret reentered the room and met the visitor.

She seemed startled by Vorm's appearance, and even more startled when he acknowledged her introduction by abruptly reaching up and unscrewing the flaring spout above his speaking-tube. He

reached into the diplomatic pouch strapped to his waist and drew out a blunt nozzle which he inserted in the gaping hole.

Margaret Zurich pretended not to notice, but Borden could see she was unsettled. Later on, he must take her aside and explain that nose-changing was a token of polite greeting in Vorm's world. Vorm's race did not need noses.

Once, perhaps, millenia ago, they had been creatures of flesh and blood. Then, like hermit crabs, they had retreated into their synthetic shells; created the shells, in fact, to shield themselves from mortal frailties. They had substituted mechanical evolution for physical evolution and now only the intelligence remained, encased in fabricated bodies that were wholly functional.

In a completely prostheticized body, the nose was only a special tool. The diplomatic pouch Vorm carried must contain a dozen different nasal attachments, each one designed for use in a given situation. Borden knew of one which served as a drill, another which was a sort of acetylene torch, still another which was merely a great razor-sharp cutting instrument. These were all useful to Vorm's race in the mines of their planet.

YES, Borden would have to make Margaret understand Vorm's alienness, his super-sensi-

tive faculties, his freedom from the physiological demands of eating, voiding, sleeping. Margaret was not like those in the street mobs who yelled, "Down with the dirty Mechs!" Mechs. Mechanical monsters, without regard for human feelings or human lives.

Borden would set Margaret straight on that point, too. It had been an accident when the Mechs killed some of the humans in the first contact crew to reach their planet. The crew hadn't known that the Mechs could detect subvocalizations, nor had they realized another important *psychological* difference. The Mechs interpreted everything literally. There were no similes, no figures of speech, no abstractions or hyperbole in their concepts.

So when a crew member, exhausted by the rigors of the long journey and discouraged by his first glimpse of the barren planet, had subvocalized to himself, "Volunteering for an expedition like this — I ought to have my head examined!" the Mechs had taken him obligingly but lethally at his unspoken word.

There had been more killing, a whole series of tragic incidents, until someone had been astute enough to ask the Mechs the reason for their actions. And the Mechs explained. Apparently they told the truth about everything — just as they accepted every state-

ment of others as the truth. When it was learned that they detected subvocalizations, "heard" them, in fact, like humanly audible speech, the remedy became obvious. From then on, crew members wore quickly improvised jammers. And as an added precaution, they tried to avoid even *thinking* in exaggerated terms.

Borden and his people had set up the invitation which brought Vorm to Earth, and he'd studied the problems connected with this first visit very thoroughly. The Mechs could be indispensable allies. If the proper treaties and agreements could be made, the Mechs might solve many vital problems. For example, a Mech could work where humans couldn't—in the mines of hot planets, on the peaks of cold planets, and amidst poisonous atmospheres or none at all.

Borden was determined to see that emissary Vorm enjoyed his stay here, but he had to admit that this business of taking everything literally was awkward at times.

For example, before Margaret left the room after her brief visit, she and Borden embraced. Worm didn't comprehend the gesture, and after she departed he indicated his curiosity.

Borden tried to tell him something about physical contact, but the whole concept of tactile, func-

tioning flesh was strange to the prosthetic being.

"No love," Borden mused. "I know you speak the truth, but it's hard for me to accept. I just can't seem to get it through my head."

Vorm reached into the diplomatic pouch and pulled out a gleaming nasal attachment. "I could drill an opening," he suggested.

BORDEN said hastily, "You don't understand," aware that he'd made a slip despite his conscientious effort to avoid one. "I was merely using a figure of speech."

"Speech is formless."

Borden nodded. "True. Yours is a realistic race."

"Very," Vorm acknowledged. "Perhaps that is why we do not comprehend your emotions."

"But you do have feelings of your own. You know what I mean when I speak of fear, greed, pride. And you have esthetic appreciation. You have told me that you enjoy music, for example."

"Yes," Vorm replied, resonating in amplified excitement. "You promised to play something for me, did you not?"

"Gladly," Borden told him.

And he was glad of the reminder. It would be easier to play than to continue the discussion on an abstract plane, trying to avoid lingual pitfalls.

Besides, the music might help drown out the disconcerting sound which was faintly audible from outside the Embassy. All afternoon long, the crowds had been parading back and forth, carrying their stupid placards. DON'T MIX WITH MECHS! and NO DEALS WITH MONSTERS! were the mildest inscriptions. And the fools kept shouting, "We know you've got a Mech in there! Will you bring him out or do you want us to come in and get him?"

Well, they wouldn't come in. Borden had the gates locked and guards posted. But it was embarrassing under the circumstances. He wished he could go out and explain the truth about those unfortunate first clashes between Vorm's race and the early contact crews. But it would take time to register, even with a person of Margaret's intelligence. In order to make a mob comprehend clearly, a whole campaign of indoctrination and education must be mounted.

Such a campaign was in the works, but it hadn't been launched as yet. Vorm's visit had been premature and unexpected; the best Borden could hope to do was shield him from the hostility of the uninformed masses. So much depended on the success of this meeting — and it was up to Borden, meanwhile, to establish and maintain cordial relations.

Borden knew how to play the

role of a charmer. He had a collection of antique tapes, and he put on a few for his visitor. Vorm seemed to enjoy the mild dissonances—the finale of Prokofieff's *Chout*, the rhythms of Villa-Lobos' *Urapuri*, Respighi's *Fountains of Rome*, and other primitive examples of olden "symphonic" musical compositions.

Noting Vorm's reaction, Borden excused himself and went off to dress, leaving his guest happily twiddling with his stereophonic and binaural ear-vents.

VORM'S preoccupation continued long enough for Borden to get down into the dining hall and check on dinner arrangements; long enough for him to admit and greet the guests who arrived—awkwardly but sensibly — through a rear entrance. It just wasn't safe to use the front entry, with the mob outside.

As it grew dark, the crowd increased. They were going to make a big demonstration, Borden knew, but there was no help for it.

He was just thankful that most of the invited guests actually showed up, despite the unpleasant situation. Most of them were government people and all of them had been briefed about their conduct. They wore jammers as a matter of course.

When the group had assembled, Borden brought Vorm into the

hall and introduced him around. For the most part, the humans managed to conceal whatever strain or agitation his presence inspired, but there was a noticeable increase in the consumption of before-dinner cocktails. Lawrence, the butler (it was a part of Embassy tradition to employ live servitors), circulated with his tray for a good half-hour or more before dinner was announced.

Vorm went in with Margaret Zurich on his arm. She displayed admirable composure. Again, Borden was proud of her, and he had no reason to be ashamed of his guests. They ate and drank quite naturally and pretended not to notice that Vorm merely sat there and employed his oral orifice for speaking purposes only.

If he felt awkward—or experienced actual repugnance — at the spectacle of human beings ingesting nourishment, he did not betray his reaction. His speaking-tube was in constant use and he seemed pleased to meet so many officials and dignitaries.

Borden noticed that he had inserted a different nasal attachment in honor of the occasion. It was a star-shaped instrument, obviously ornamental, for it was studded with diamonds. Several of the ladies openly admired it. Borden wondered what they would have said if Vorm had chosen instead to wear his drill, or perhaps

the long razorlike knife. Surely the ladies would have remembered the “murdering monster” stories and reacted unpleasantly.

For that matter, Vorm probably regarded the throat-jammers as ceremonial decoration. If he was aware of the absence of subvocalizations, he gave no sign.

All was well. There were no untoward incidents during the course of the dinner and Borden was quite relieved at its successful conclusion. He led his guests into the drawing room and there announced that Margaret would play a few selections in honor of the distinguished visitor.

Some of the guests had never actually seen an old-fashioned “piano” before, but all of them were aware of Margaret’s reputation as an artist. They settled down to enjoy the impromptu musicale.

Borden and Vorm sat together, directly before the instrument. Vorm seemed fascinated with the spectacle of a “live” performance.

MARGARET’S repertoire was classical, of course. She specialized in the three Bs — Bartok, Brubeck and Bernstein — and Borden sat back, beaming in pride as she played.

“Do you play?” Vorm asked softly.

“A very little,” Borden admitted. “But I lack the touch.” He hesitated. “Sometimes I think I wasn’t



cut out for diplomacy. I should have been a—”

There was a sudden crash, and Borden jumped to his feet.

Everyone started at the sound, then stared at the pavement block which had landed on the tessellated floor. Through the broken window came the clamor of the mob outside.

Lawrence hurried over to Borden's side and whispered. Borden faced his guests with a set smile.

“Please don't be alarmed,” he said. “There has been a slight accident downstairs. I'll attend to it. Margaret, if you'll be good enough to continue—”

And she did continue, while Borden raced down the hall, then took the stairway steps two at a time. Lawrence followed him with a force-gun such as the guards were holding in the foyer below.

“Nasty,” Lawrence said. “They got through the gates somehow. It's all the men can do to keep them from breaking down the door. Captain Rollins is afraid they'll have to open fire soon unless something is done to disperse the crowd. He wants your orders—”

Borden nodded and brushed past him.

“Wait, sir!” the butler quavered. “You aren't going out there, are you? Here, you forgot the gun—”

Borden kept going. At the door, Captain Rollins stepped up to in-

tercept him. Borden walked past without a word and opened the door.

The roar of the mob struck him like a great blow.

“Give us the Mech! We know he's in there!”

Borden raised his hands, palms outward, to show he was unarmed. The gesture had its inevitable, immemorial quieting effect.

Afterward, he couldn't quite remember just what it was he had to say. But words come easily to the trained diplomat, and Borden had risen to his present position due to superior qualifications.

He started out by telling the crowd they had nothing to fear. Yes, there was a Mech inside, but couldn't they see guards had been posted all around the building for the protection of the public? The Mech couldn't possibly escape to harm anyone. Besides, he didn't want to do any harm. Right now he was listening to music. Yes, the Mech was a music-lover! And if they didn't believe it, they could hear for themselves, through the window.

So there was absolutely no danger. The Mech was guarded, would be guarded until tomorrow, when he'd return to his own planet. He had come here under government invitation, to conclude a treaty. The government needed Mechs to mine metals for the Galaxy.

BORDEN found himself explaining about the death of the crewmen during the first contacts. He went into a simplified description of subvocalization, using his own jammer by way of illustration.

As he lifted it back from his neck, there was a single frightening moment of realization which he forced himself to suppress. Smiling, he went on with his talk.

There was nothing to be alarmed about, he repeated. In fact, the Mech thought the guards were here to protect *him* — he was afraid of people! If it hadn't been for the music, he'd probably be hiding under his bed right now!

This got a laugh from the mob, and after that the rest was routine. In five minutes, Borden managed to break up the assemblage. In ten minutes, the street in front of the Embassy was almost cleared. Borden was able to turn matters over to Captain Rollins.

"You did a wonderful job, sir," Rollins told him. He paused. "Why, what's the matter?"

"Look at this." Borden held up the jammer. "When I took it off to show the crowd just now, I noticed the input feeder was broken. It isn't working."

"Think it came loose when you removed it?"

"I hope so." Borden's voice was tense. "I'd hate to think I'd been sitting upstairs with our guest with-

out the protection of a jammer."

He spied Vorm coming down the stairs, and turned, quickly detaching the jammer from Captain Rollins' throat. "I'll need this," he said. He barely managed to adjust it when Vorm arrived at the foot of the stairway.

"I'm sorry, but I had to come," Vorm said. "I know I caused you this trouble."

"It was all a mistake," Borden answered. "A misunderstanding."

"Gracious of you to say so," Vorm droned, his cranium bobbing. "But I understand what happened. They came to destroy me and you turned them away. You saved me."

"Do not be offended. They just didn't understand."

"I am not offended. I admire you. You see, I do possess certain of your emotions after all. While our race does not comprehend love, it knows admiration. And it knows gratitude. I am grateful to you, Mr. Borden. I must reward you."

"No need, I assure you."

"I shall see to it that we conclude the treaty of which you spoke."

"I am overwhelmed."

"But that is not enough. I must think of something suitable for you, personally."

"Forget it, please."

"I never forget anything."

"Shall we join the others?"

THEY did, and the episode concluded. Margaret made no attempt to resume playing, and in a short while the guests departed. Although reasonably sure that there was no longer any danger from the crowd, Borden insisted that they again use the rear exit. As for Margaret, he persuaded her to stay over for the night. "I'll feel safer if you do," he told her.

"Very well, if you insist."

She said good night to Vorm, and Lawrence escorted her down the hall to one of the guest apartments at the end of the corridor.

Borden was left alone with Vorm, but not for long. He was embarrassed by the Mech's protestations of gratitude.

"Isn't there something you want?" he kept repeating.

"Not a thing." Borden shook his head emphatically. "Now if I may be excused—"

"That is right. You must rest, is it not so? There is much I do not understand about the human structure."

"Good night."

"It is, isn't it?" Vorm agreed.

Borden retired to his own quarters. It had been an eventful evening. The affair was successfully concluded, the mob had dispersed, Vorm was favorably inclined toward a treaty. There was nothing to worry about — except, perhaps, the matter of the defective jam-

mer. Quite probably it *had* failed when he took it from his throat out there before the mob. But if it had failed earlier —

Frantically, he attempted to recall any subvocalizations he might have made earlier in the course of the evening. It was an almost hopeless effort; one is scarcely aware of the constant and habitual phenomenon. Borden could only hope that his conscious efforts to think and speak only in literal terms had been successful; that he had not inadvertently emitted some perfectly normal idiom which might be capable of disturbing interpretation.

He could not fall into deep slumber until near dawn, and he must have overslept as a consequence, because when he awoke, Lawrence was shaking him and saying something to the effect that Vorm had gone.

"Gone?" Borden sat upright in bed. "But I was to take him to the launching-site myself."

"Captain Rollins did so, sir. And knowing you were tired—"

"But I meant to say good-by."

"It wasn't really necessary. Vorm told me to express his gratitude."

"That again!"

"I'm afraid so, sir. You seem to have made a lasting impression on him because of your conduct last night. A diplomatic triumph, if I may say so." He coughed. "In

fact, he left you a little farewell gift."

LAURENCE extended the small white box and Borden fumbled with the wrappings.

"What for? More gratitude, I presume?"

"Exactly." Lawrence smiled. "He said he'd spent hours trying to think of something for a man who claimed he had everything. Fortunately, he told me, he forgets nothing. And he happened to remember that you expressed a certain wish last night, which he was happy to be able to fulfill."

Borden halted in his efforts to untie the package. "A wish?" he muttered. "I don't recall—"

"He said that now you would be able to play the piano well."

Borden put down the package, very slowly.

He stood up, thinking about Vorm. Vorm, who didn't understand love, but who knew gratitude. Vorm, who didn't comprehend human flesh and its frailty, but who knew that he could change parts of his own body at will, by simply unscrewing one instrument and replacing it with another.

Vorm, who took everything absolutely literally. Vorm, who could install a nasal appendage which was like a great razor.

"What's the matter, sir?" Lawrence murmured. "Aren't you even going to look at your gift?"

But Borden was already running down the hall toward Margaret's room.

He knew it was too late, just as he knew what must be in the package. Because now it came to him — he could remember how he and Vorm had sat there watching Margaret play the piano.

"Do you play?" Vorm had asked.

"A very little. But I lack the touch," Borden had replied. And he'd paused, and the subvocalization must have come then. Yes, it must have come then, and the jammer was already broken, and Vorm had heard the unspoken wish — the wish he'd just granted, literally.

Borden raced down the hall, the subvocalization thundering in his ears. Yes, he remembered the words now.

"I wish I had those fingers—"

—ROBERT BLOCH



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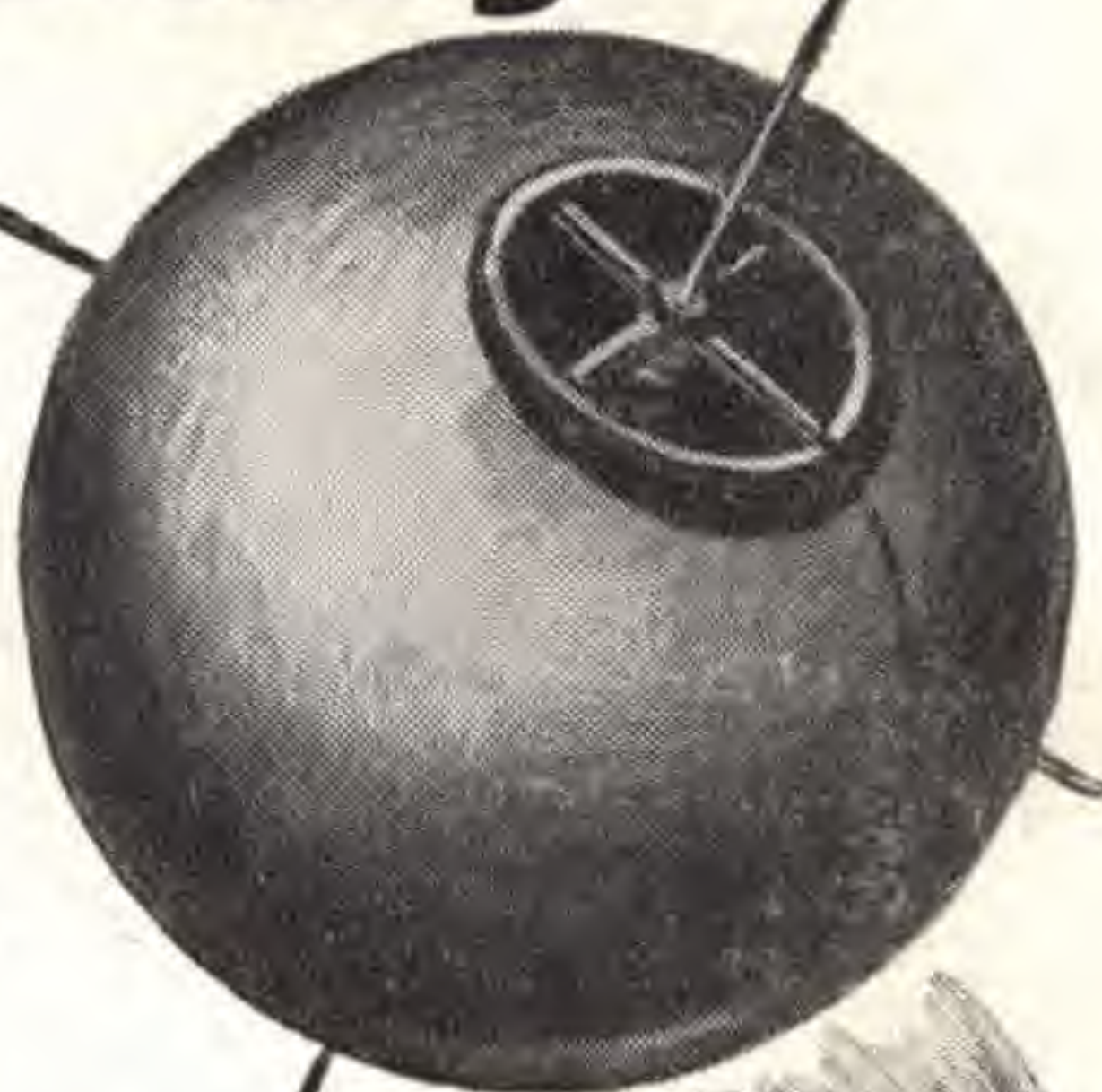
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